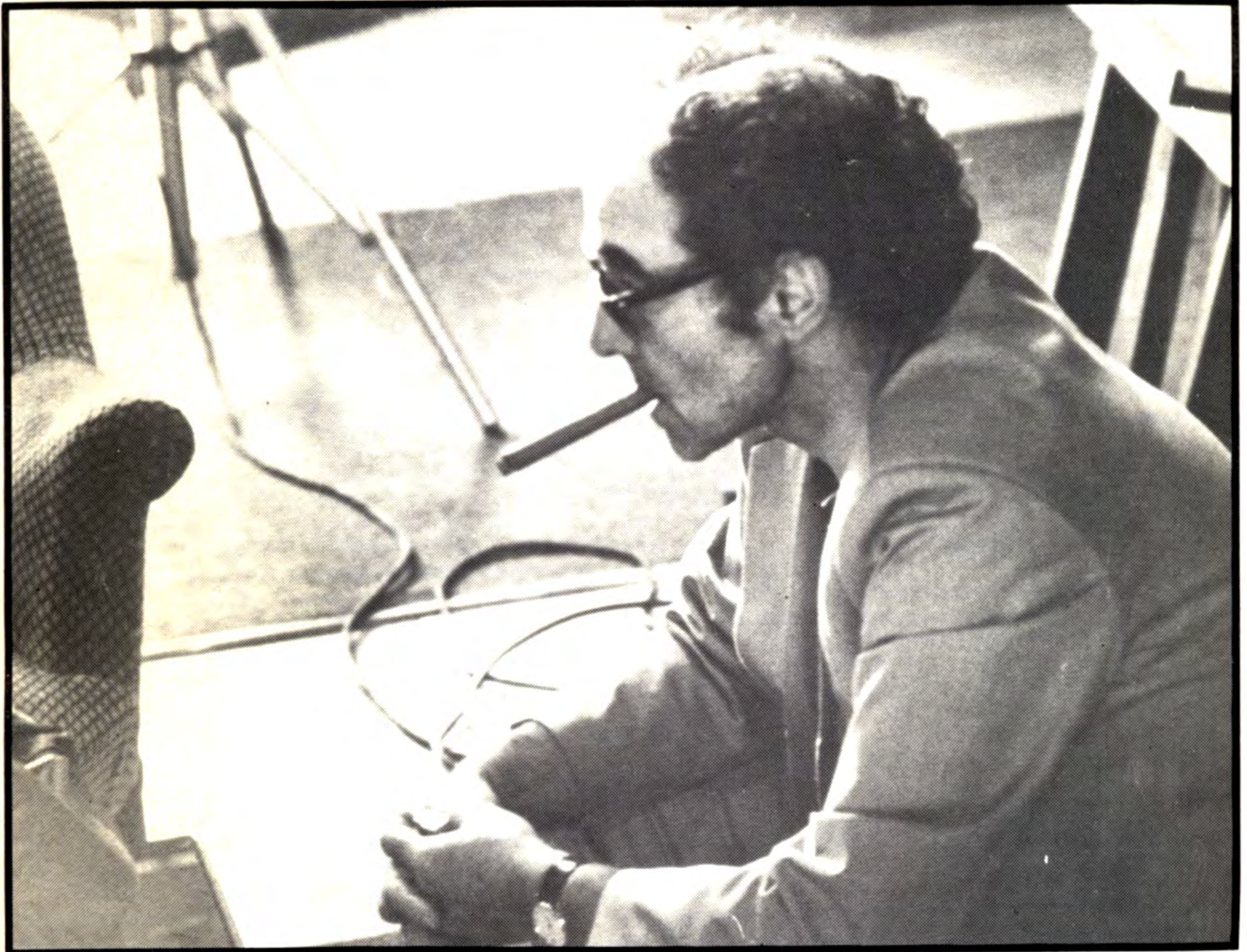


# cineACTION!

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A MAGAZINE OF RADICAL FILM CRITICISM & THEORY

No. 11  
Winter '87-'88



Surely, M. Godard,  
every film must have a  
beginning, a middle  
and an end?

CANADIAN HITS • NICARAGUAN DOCUMENTARIES



# CineAction!

## No. 11

## December 1987

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### CORRECTION:

Richard Lippe's article on Rock Hudson in *CineAction!* #10 was incorrectly titled "Rock Hudson: His Story." The article's title is actually "Rock Hudson: His Stories," the point being that "his story" doesn't exist.

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# POLITICS AND FORM:

## Not Necessarily in That Order

Once no question was more important to the study of film than the relationships among film form and political meaning, effect and intention. But, for the armour of institutional discipline, *Film Studies* has largely surrendered its patina of political commitment. What's happened to film studies? Business as usual. Whether through an *au courant* post-structuralist synthesis of semiotics and psychoanalysis or the continuation of authorial and generic excavation, the celebration or the condemnation of the classic canon, academics compete over, generate and replicate meta-textual paradigms to fill the slots of conference, journal, classrooms—institutional service through the categories of the dominant cinematic institutions.

But even scholarly respectability should worry if that canon is being fixed like a dead object of study, with the discovery of meaning, the vitality of theory and practice subservient to the logocentric fixing of the cinematic image. (Is there any teacher of film who, belabouring some classic of cinema past, wondering if film or students are more inert, has not heard Brecht ask, "Do we still get anything out of it?") It may be that the aesthetics of classic cinema are lost, disappearing into the relentlessly proliferating image multiplication of media industries, so we can only see grist for the academic mills or we can chant, in Baudrillardian delirium, about the end of meaning. But the study of films is not so depressingly static or stable; there is crisis and ferment—debate within the sophisticated orthodoxies, anxiety over the abstruse impasses of theory disconnected from vital images and the persistence of political motives and practice.

For, if cinema is dead, making films in different or new, better or worse ways, is not; all the old challenges are still there. The academic left often responds by lamenting the sixties or awaiting the *deus ex machina* of "movements", but within history's always too slow tempo, a concrete focus is possible. At minimum, a political film criticism must optimistically imagine a productive engagement with past films and a generative connection to possible oppositional practice—which must take us into the realm of political and aesthetic meanings.

This is one version of *CineAction*'s project. But obviously this magazine is marked by the very process I've been describing—a product of academic film studies, its limitations and fissures. Indeed, our established success (three years now) may also indicate that we are often a film journal *comme les autres*, to use Godard's phrase. Our political commitment, not so much as good or bad will, but as an organized intervention, often seems incantatory gloss on displays of textual virtuosity. As well, our collective is factionally divided much like the discipline in general, with varied relations to post-structuralism, auteur and genre theory, feminism . . . with the correction that left politics hopefully provides. (As a Marxist, I find all the positions need to debate many issues: their concentration on competitive interpretation within *Film Studies*' definitions; the overriding use of psychoanalysis—its fixing on the individual categories of subject and spectator and its inability to confront historical transformation; politically, the constricted horizons of the reformist movements of the '70s. Most of this collective would argue differently and these differences should play a more prominent role in the magazine over the next issues, indeed provide a test of our political nature and seriousness.)

The project of political film and criticism must still make us think of Godard—whose films were at once emblematic of the aim of unifying radical, in fact, Marxist theory and practice, of the theoretical and political intensification of film criticism and perhaps the peak of the great wave of narrative experimentation in post-war cinema. So much was on Godard's shoulders that film theory has not forgiven him for not realizing *the* political cinema. The failure of the Dziga Vertov group can perhaps be explained by the defeat of the New Left or the inadequacies of Maoist moralism or a too simple reduction of dominant form to dominant ideology. (Too little or too much Althusser?) But who could have imagined that Godard's provocative slogans and jokes would have become academic litanies for Hollywood-bashing or recipes for turgid "theory" films? His more recent films have been all too often ignored, unsuitable for the assembly lines of repetitive analysis. Perhaps more importantly, as Godard and contemporary theory retreated from Marxism, those films have remorselessly and grimly entered and mirrored the impossible labyrinths of language and ideology structuralism and post-structuralism have produced.

If Godard's work remains provocative and important for politically involved criticism and practice, it is surely not an optimistic model. No filmmaker has reminded us more of the death of cinema, of the power and passing of classic cinema, of the difficulty of revolutionary cinema or of the contradictions of engagement; no figure set out a more ambitious program—perhaps its modest continuation sets a reachable horizon.

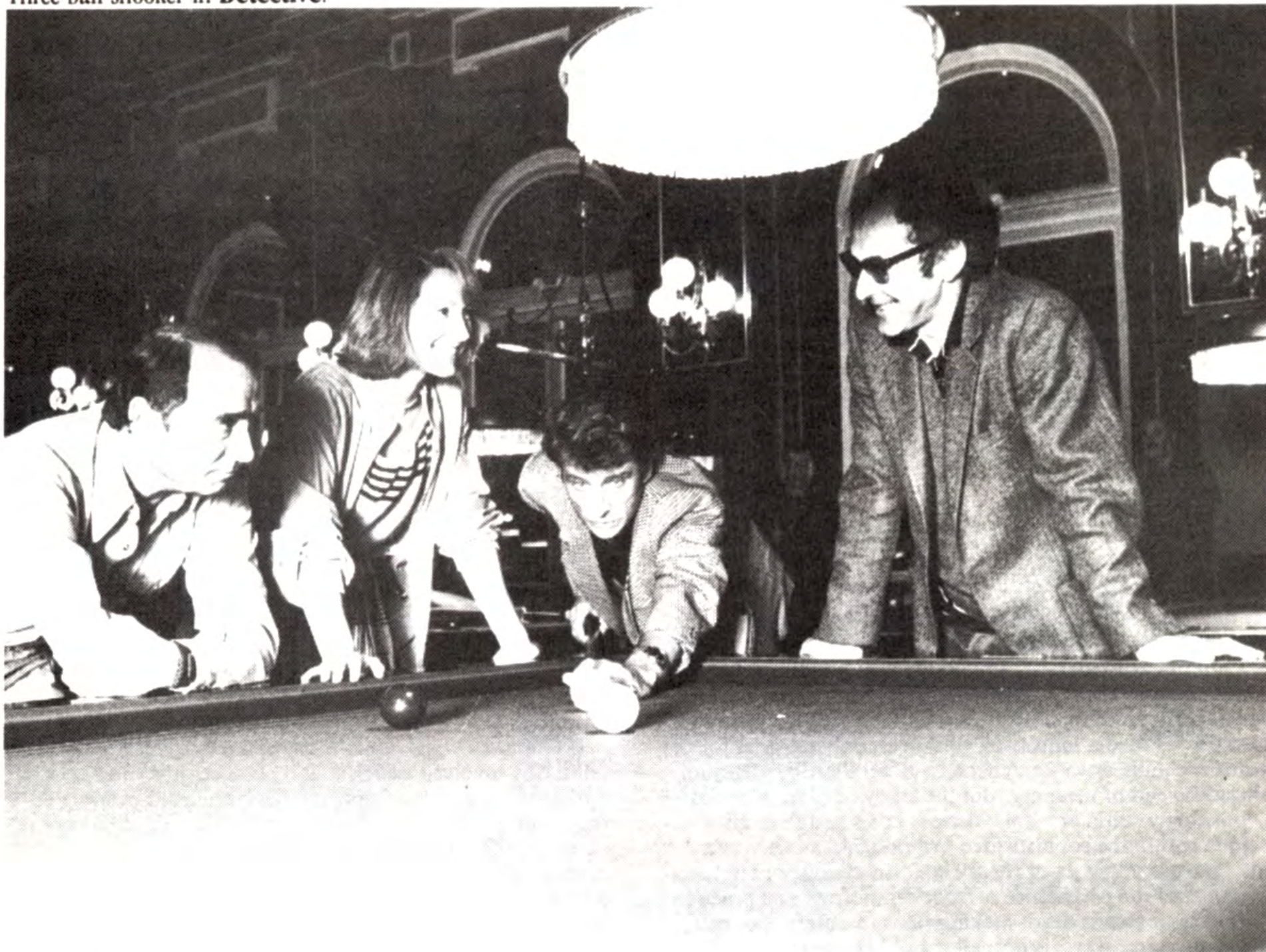
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It should not be imagined that the writers assembled here speak precisely to such aims or resolve these dilemmas, indeed many would be startled to be introduced by such terms at all. Their selection has not been thematic but eclectic, following my own varied interest. That eclecticism can also be seen as encompassing the diversity of forms and modes of interpretation significant criticism needs to address and debate. Films discussed here include contemporary fiction, political documentaries, "art" of the European auteurs and the American avant-garde and, of course, early and recent films of Jean-Luc Godard. As well, from a variety of political positions, different interpretive needs are met. Most clearly, the political meaning and effect of the varied forms are investigated by several writers. The prominence accorded here to political documentary is particularly important to me—despite banishment outside the crass binary oppositions of sophisticated theory, the documentary remains the left's most successful and useful cinematic intervention. Other articles highlight the specificity and strength of the aesthetic, the "relative autonomy" of form and image—whether the terms used are metaphysical, self-reflexive or about sensibilities. Finally, criticism must operate in national contexts, against the homogenization which dominant cinema imposes from America—in Canadian and Québécois experimental, documentary and fiction films, where such distinctions have a long and difficult history, in Nicaragua where imperialism is fought culturally and militarily, in Hungary, buffeted by "the stormy winds of history" from which none of us is insulated.

Scott Forsyth



Three-ball snooker in **Detective**.



# Metaphysical Cinema:

## TWO RECENT FILMS BY JEAN-LUC GODARD

by **Peter Harcourt**

I am the only American filmmaker in exile. American films are my parents.

JEAN-LUC GODARD (1985)

**I**N SPITE OF THE TIRED AND INFREQUENT CRITICAL commentary that has greeted his latest films,<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Godard is back in top form. In this year alone he has given us the "Armide" episode in *Aria*; a throw-away film for the Cannon Group, *King Lear*—"a film shot in the back," as Godard describes it; and most recently, *Soigne ta droite* for Gaumont. Godard has often made several films at a time; and two years ago, in 1985, he released a pair of films that might represent the antipodes of his remarkably broad artistic practice—*Je vous salue, Marie* and *Detective*.

In fact, if looked at closely (which no one has wanted to do) *Je vous salue, Marie* and *Detective* represent a twin achievement unparalleled even within Godard's own career. They go together as *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* and *Made in USA* went together back in the '60s. Like *Deux ou Trois Choses*, *Marie* exposes the mundane and yet discovers the marvellous; like *Made in USA*, *Detective* embodies a comical re-working of the conventions of Godard's most beloved American genre—the *film noir*.

Although more self-consciously beautiful than his early work, Godard's latest films—from *Sauve qui peut, la vie* (1979), through to *Soigne ta droite* (1987)—are still organized in much the same way. They still combine elements of the reverential with suggestions of the absurd; and while espousing the sculptural potentialities within the cinematic image—most astonishingly in *Passion* (1980)<sup>2</sup>—they still refuse the



simpler forms of narrative that rely on a linear rationality of cause and effect.

Refusing narrative causality throughout his career, Godard has replaced it with two alternative rhetorical strategies—allusion and paradox. Godard has often claimed that he himself has invented nothing: he has simply made use of what is already there, of what has been lying around. In this way, his art might be described as the art of collage. His films are rich fabrics of intertwining allusions to many other works—whether literary, filmic, philosophical or musical; and, through the process of de-contextualization and then of re-contextualization, Godard introduces the dimension of paradox. His films all present the spectator with an uncertainty of tone.

Furthermore, by transplanting all his source material into the space of his own films, Godard not only establishes irony but he contests the confidence with which we have assigned meaning to this source material in its original context. While creating new work in the present, Godard simultaneously refreshes our perception of whatever other works he refers to from the past.

Throughout Godard's work, there has also been a constant play with binary thinking—the either/or dichotomies that are so close to the heart of French structuralism, the value of which has now been confirmed (at least for Godard) by the on/off commands that activate computers. If this play with oppositions is a source of comedy in Godard's work, it is also a source of what many of his detractors experience as oppression.

These oppositions seem oppressive when one feels that there is no dialectical play possible between them, when there is no flexibility within their contradictory commands. However, if Godard chooses to hold these commands in a state of conflict, refusing resolutions, he also plays with imbalances between them.

In all of Godard's work, we can experience a comic release from the philosophical oppressions of these dyadic systems through the play with imbalances between their parts. This play with imbalances is also related to Godard's concern with scale. It is frequently even embodied in his images. In *Pierrot le fou* (1965), we see a tiny man with a huge bottle of coke; in *l'Anticipation* (1966), we see a small, old-fashioned woman with an extraordinarily large comb; and in *King Lear*, Edgar tramps through the woods with William Shakespeare Jr. the 5th carrying a huge green butterfly net!

But to deal with allusion and paradox and to understand more specifically Godard's ironic play with binary systems, let us look more closely at *Je vous salue, Marie*. Arguably, it is one of the more accessible of his most recent films. After all, this story has been lying around for ages; so we are free to concentrate on how Godard has chosen to retell it.

\*

**A** SENSE OF THE NUMINOUS IS NOT NEW TO the work of Jean-Luc Godard. It is recurrent throughout *Le Mépris* (1963), especially in the closing shot of the film. As Godard's camera cranes past Fritz Lang's camera, past the crew and cast, past Ulysses, and out onto the open sea, Godard himself, who serves within this film as Lang's assistant, cries out the final command of the film—*Silenzio!* Meanwhile, all we see on the screen is the silent infinitude of the sea. *Pierrot le fou* ends in much the same way.

However, *Je vous salue, Marie* confronts the numinous far more directly. Explicitly indebted to Bresson (there are references both to *Pickpocket* and to *Au hasard, balthazar*), *Marie*

seems in many ways the complement of *Prénom Carmen*. What might happen, *Carmen* seems to be asking, if a woman of such fiery sensuality were unleashed within the polite and proper middle-class world of contemporary Switzerland? And what might happen, *Marie* seems to be asking, if a virgin birth were to occur in the world today? In another way, however, *Marie* could also be seen as the complement of *Passion*. If *Passion* is investigating the source of icons that have endured; then *Je vous salue, Marie* is investigating the source of life itself.

At Godard's insistence, *Je vous salue, Marie* is preceded by *Le livre de Marie*—a short film made by Godard's current collaborator, Anne-Marie Miéville. This film is full of binary oppositions! In a most classical, structuralist way, *Le livre de Marie* opposes the beauty of images of nature to the ugliness of disputatious speech; Nature to Culture; woman to man; yin to yang—literally “v” to “^” in this film, when Marie visits her father and they study triangles together, she forming a trough with her hands, he a roof.

If all this seems very Godardian, one has to assume that it is also Miévilian. The real link between these two films, however, is to be found in the lesson Marie's mother gives her about the meaning of her name. “Marie,” in French, her mother explains, is like “aimer,” to love. It is this investigation into the nature of love, both earthly and extra-terrestrial, that leads us directly to *Je vous salue, Marie*.

*En ce temps là . . .* This short title provides the only clue that we have reached the end of Miéville's half-hour short and that Godard's feature has begun. Godard's film opens with a shot of the lake, the surface of which is disturbed by splashes caused by falling objects. While this moment will be diegetically placed later on in the film, the absence of narrative containment at the moment re-inforces the notion also posited by the film that life on earth might have fallen from the sky!

The first words we hear, however, are “Out of my mouth is shit.” They are spoken by Juliette, the unhappy lover of Joseph, whose sexual functions (because she is not loved?) feel to her to be excremental in some way. This mouth/anus dyad has been part of Godard's work since *Numéro Deux*, and it is immediately, disturbingly established in this film about “virgin” birth.

“We could get married,” Juliette continues. But Joseph refuses his attention. “Men think that they enter a woman . . .” he begins to say; when we cut to a gym full of young women playing netball, with balls falling through hoops. We hear Marie (Myriem Roussel) wondering to herself about what might befall her in this life. Right now, she feels like “just a shadow of the moon.” Then as we hear Bach's C Major Prelude on the sound-track, Godard cuts to a shot outside of the full moon at night.

Godard's distinctive use of music merits an article in itself.<sup>3</sup> His use of classical music in the past—most significantly in *Une Femme Mariée* (1964) and in *Deux ou Trois Choses que je sais d'elle* (1966)—seem to signify an absence. The bits of Beethoven that we hear in those films represent a value-system no longer accessible to the characters in the film, no longer part of their daily lives.

In his later work, however, music begins to take on a diegetic force. It less implies an absence than it becomes a presence. By the women who are privileged enough to hear it, the background music is actually referred to as a quality in the air in *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*.<sup>4</sup> In *Je vous salue, Marie*, moreover, as in *Passion* before it, the music is crucial for conveying to us this sense of the numinous—a sense of wonder at the existence of things.





**Je vous salue, Marie:** the parody **and** achievement of iconic authority . . .



This sense of wonder is what sustains us after political activity has been engaged in and political effort has failed. It is what might still exist in moments of recess within the privileged corners of the privileged countries of the world—a world in which politics have become (in the words of the exiled Czechoslovakian professor in *Je vous salue, Marie*) “the voice of horror about which nothing can be said.”

After the opening scenes of *Je vous salue, Marie*, to the portentous sounds of Dvořák’s ‘cello concerto in B minor, a huge passenger jet flies in low through some trees. As the roar of its engines compete with the Dvořák for the attention of our ears, Godard cuts away for a moment to a shot of Marie in her bathroom, brushing her hair. She looks up at the sound, as if realizing that the plane might be bringing her something of significance. Then Godard cuts back again to the plane, but this time in extreme long-shot—the plane a tiny minnow passing over a huge setting sun. Then cut yet again to the plane in medium long-shot, coming into the airport, bringing with it from the “extra-terrestrial” world evoked by this film—the thug Gabriel and his precocious niece.

This sequence very much foregrounds Godard’s concern in this film with questions of scale. By the plane being huge, then minuscule, and then a normal size again (normal within the cinematic conventions of planes landing at airports), Godard activates our awareness of the position from which we view the world. From the position of our own perspective, of course. But Godard suggests that other perspectives are available.

During the science outing with the Czech professor and his class—the scene, by the way, in which we see the stones being thrown into the water, the splashes of which constituted the

opening shot of this film—the professor directly discusses problems of scale—but here less of space than of time.

Amazed by the “intelligence” of computers, he has begun to question the received theories about the origin of the universe—questions which sent him into exile from rationalist, Communist Czechoslovakia. “What if life on earth had been willed?” he asks his class. “What if it had fallen from the sky?” During the outing, he is asking his students to contemplate what their descendants may know about the universe—“a million years from now? 100 million years from now?” He is inviting them to make connections between the known and the unknown, between the small and the large.

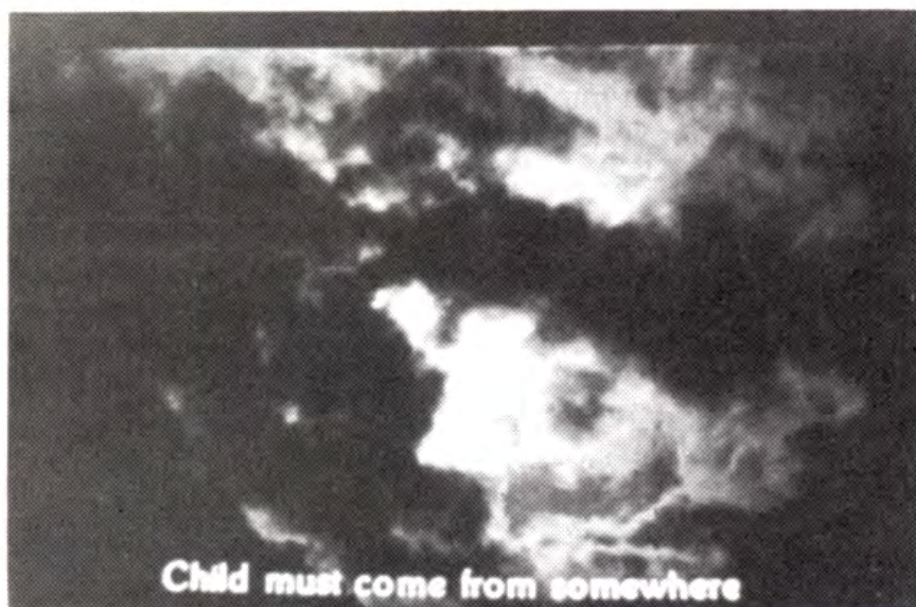
Earlier in the film, there was a scene with two of the students, Eve and Pascal. With Eve’s hands covering his eyes, we had seen Pascal snapping a Rubic cube into resolution to her computer-like yes/no commands, while on the soundtrack we could hear Bach’s mighty Toccata in D minor snapping itself into a resolution of a very different kind.

Throughout this film, Godard contrasts terrestrial wonders within the specificities of observable life on earth. “The child must come from somewhere,” Joseph complains as Marie attempts to explain to him her innocent pregnancy. At this point Godard cuts to a Rubenesque sky with blue-black clouds receding into points of light, the sun made tiny by a dense swirl of clouds. Then, as if to return to the scale of the social world, we cut to a netball game again.

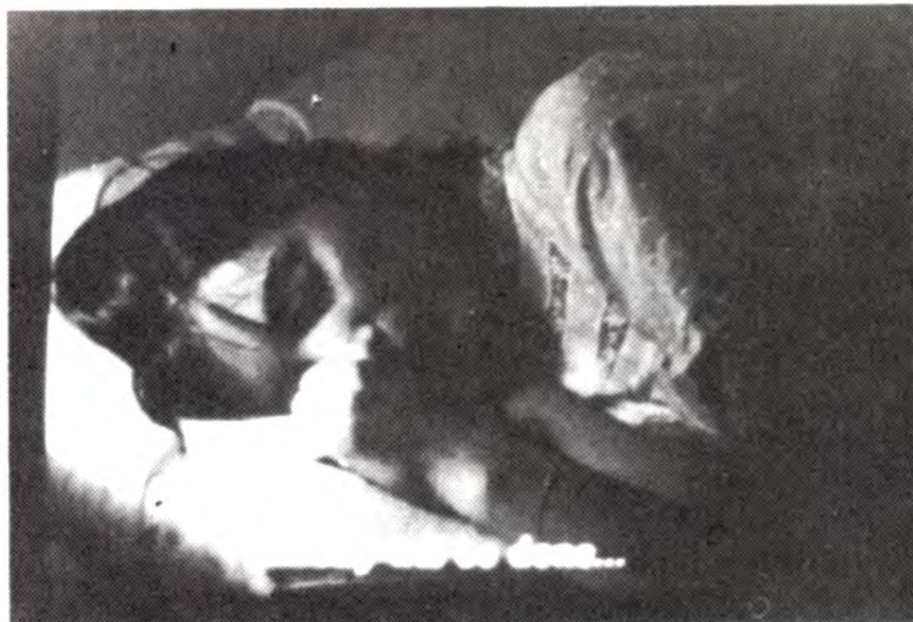
In *Je vous salue, Marie*, Godard is concerned to establish connections between the natural and the cultural. Repeatedly, icons from nature are compared with icons from culture. After the full shot of the moon towards the opening of the film, once the aircraft has landed, we see the same moon now small in the distance to the right of the screen, while in a

Rubenesque clouds . . .

Pascal as extra-terrestrial . . .







close-up to the left is a red traffic light. Similarly, towards the end of the film, after Joseph and Marie have watched yet another netball game together, Dvořák's 'cello concerto takes us outside to the moon again, and then to a large white globe in the street, around which Marie drapes herself.

Furthermore, throughout the first section of this film, up until the birth of Fabian, the "divine" child, the orange light of Joseph's taxi-cab sign is constantly creeping into the screen, as if trying to find out what is happening. It seems like a kind of vigilance—a caring "cultural" light.

For viewers ill-prepared to accept the extra-terrestrial references in this film, one way of dealing with them is to see them as a parody of the conventions of science-fiction. During the scene in the classroom between Eve and Pascal, while he is snapping the Rubic cube into resolution, not only do Eve's yes/no commands parallel the on/off commands appropriate to a computer, but there had been a previous shot through the back of Pascal's punk-rock yellow hair. "If you want to see an extra-terrestrial," the Czech professor had said, "go and look at yourself in the mirror." Indeed, this shot of Pascal from the back of his head does seem as strange and as "extra-terrestrial" as anything that Steven Spielberg has devised.

Finally, however, I think the film is more than this, more than parody, more than merely playful. *Marie* embodies a complex cluster of suggestions which necessitates a most speculative hermeneutics—a hermeneutics that involve sexual, social, and mythical dimensions.

\*

and earthly shadows in *Je vous salue, Marie*.



**T**HROUGHOUT GODARD'S WORK, SEXUAL relationships have always been problematical. Like Truffaut in this, his "love" films—*Le Petit Soldat* (1960), *Vivre sa vie* (1962), *Pierrot le fou* (1965) and *Masculin-Féminin* (1966)—all end in death. Sexual politics within the family are thoroughly and painfully examined in *Numéro Deux* (1975). Furthermore, *Numéro Deux* also relates sexual potency to Godard's personal, artistic activity.

In the light of these prior representations of sexual life, *Je vous salue, Marie* might seem like the refusal of sexuality, presenting a love without touch, without carnal penetration. However, these personal concerns also imply a sociological dimension.

In the world today, women are the recipients of social and sexual violence—far more than men. This violence relates to sexuality, to the territorial battles that sexuality entails. We have seen this in Anne-Marie Miéville's film, *Le livre de Marie*, in which these territorial squabbles are presented largely from a woman's point-of-view—chiefly the child's. *Je vous salue, Marie*, on the other hand, effectively re-creates the old 17th-century notions of profane and sacred love.

Eve, the rich rationalist, called Eva by her Czechoslovakian lover/teacher, engages in a purely sexual affair with him. Of course, it terminates in violence—in shouting and screaming and honking of horns and banging of doors, all taking place around a car parked in a railway station with trains hurtling back and forth. These signifiers of industrial efficiency, these trains and cars, are, increasingly for Godard, symptoms of our inability to feel, of our inability to relate meaningfully to one another. However, even in this scene, Godard is not focussing solely on interpersonal relationships. Once again, there is the philosophical concern with scale.

Yin and yang from *Le livre de Marie*.





"Life is too sad," Eve cries out in her self-pitying way. "No," replies her teacher, "it's large." Within the total scheme of things, Eve's little romantic grief is not of great concern.

The situation is different with Marie. While she may work in a gas-station, we never see her in a car. In fact, when Gabriel has driven off in Joseph's taxi, after his abrupt and angry "Annunciation" to Marie, such violence as has been present in this scene disappears with the car. As Marie hops her way back to her house, we might notice on the wall behind her a sign that says "*Bonne Route!*". Socially, this may be a salutation to motorists; but it is a symbolic indication for Marie.

While the myth of virgin birth is by no means the monopoly of the Christian church, like all myths, there is a distressful relevance within it. Since our collective cultural consciousness has been at least partly formed both by its mysteries and by its mystifications, it still somewhat affects our minds today.

Gabriel is presented as a thug in this film, as a bully whose job it is to make Joseph toe the line—according to the rules, according to the law, as he says. His thuggishness might suggest that even an immaculate conception involves violence of some kind. As Michel Foucault has written, when discussing the work of Hölderlin: "The mythical forces . . . are those in which divine violence penetrates mortals to create a proximity in which they are illuminated and reduced to ashes . . ."<sup>5</sup> This is approximately what happens to Marie.

During her pregnancy, Marie's anguish is presented with great physical force. She has to suffer the child within her, as indeed any woman must. But Marie has not chosen. She has been chosen; and as she clenches her fists and shakes them towards the heavens, we have images that achieve (I would argue) true iconic authority at the same time as they might seem to be parodying painterly iconic authority of the past. In the best Brechtian tradition, Godard allows us to laugh while his characters cry!<sup>6</sup>

I remember especially three compelling moments: First of all, when Marie is alone with Joseph in her bedroom, showing him her body, asking for his love and yet refusing his touch: Gabriel suddenly appears, and Marie strikes an open-mouthed pose of a Renaissance painting. Secondly, there is the extended curve of her pregnant belly that fills the frame for a moment, the dark stretch of her navel at the centre of our gaze: this shot is as compelling as any of the magnificent tableaux that Godard re-created for *Passion*. Finally, during Marie's moments of twisting-and-turning torment in bed, trying to understand the workings of "His divine Will": she is quiet for a moment, lying on her side. We can see her body, including the dark shadows of her pubic hair, above which is her clenched fist bathed in a white light. This shot suggests both the vulnerability of her sex as a woman and the strength of her own will—even if its fate just now is to submit to the will of an Other.

The scene of the birth is idyllically handled, with a strong tinge of parody. Snow falls, and there is a move to the country—although we do not see Marie in the car. Then we hear a baby crying; and, lo and behold, we see a manger! There is a cow licking its new-born. There is a donkey—a reference both to nativity tradition and to Bresson's Balthazar—plus a further reference to Bresson's deterministic universe when Joseph, quoting the closing line from *Pick-pocket*, says to Marie: "What a strange road I had to take to reach you." Again, as always with Godard, such moments allow us both to be amused and to be moved.

Then spring, with blossoms on the trees, and Bach's "Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring" on the sound-track. "Fabian"

receives a secular baptism with his mother in a swimming pool; and, when he gets older, he like to play "whale" with her. He likes to put his head beneath her dress and have her name for him her private parts—*une prairie, les cloches!* Like the young Marie in Ann-Marie Miéville's film, Fabian is interested in the details of his origins.

From the moment of the birth, *Je vous salue, Marie* becomes extremely compressed in terms of time—in terms of the "real" time referred to by the film. After Fabian has disappeared into a field, saying "I am He who is!" and Eve has had her final fight with her lover/prof, Godard cuts to a pedestrian crossing on a street.

In a way that more suggests Plato's cave than anything in Christianity, there have been a number of references to shadows in the film—*mere* shadows, in fact, as if of a life not fully lived. On the pedestrian crossing of this busy street, we now see legs crossing, of course, as we see arrows pointing the way for oncoming cars. The citizens are all following the signs of the city, obediently, mechanically. We do not see their faces and the shadows cast by their legs are larger than they are.

We then see Marie, walking towards a car. When Gabriel appears, he is no longer looking thuggish and is no longer with his niece. "*Madame,*" he calls out to her, as if in special recognition, "*Je vous salue, Marie!*"

I am not sure how to interpret these final moments. It would appear, however, that, the divine task performed, both characters have been returned to carnality, to their physical life in the social world. At the opening of the film, Marie felt like a shadow of the moon. Perhaps now by the close she *has* been reduced to ashes (as Foucault has suggested about such privileged characters). She is entering a car; and in a series of big close-ups, we see her hesitating before putting on some lipstick—always for Godard, an indication of prostitution.

Only the upper half of her open, crimson-painted mouth is available for the closing image of the film. After all the nudity, experienced throughout this film as divinely necessary and part of a greater order, this closing shot is, arguably, the only "indecent" shot in the film.

Meanwhile, Bach's "The St. Matthew Passion" reaches us through the sound-track. The expression of the spiritual in art has been returned to music, where it has always, most securely belonged.

If *Je vous salue, Marie* is not entirely a holy film, it is wholly and unmistakably a film by Jean-Luc Godard.

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**W**HEN WE MOVE ON TO *DETECTIVE*, WE MOVE back into more familiar territory. Gone now is the sense of the numinous. Gone too are the Swiss Alps and the extraordinary sunsets and moonscapes. We are back to France and Paris and we are confined within a hotel—a first-class hotel in a second-class city, as Uncle William Prospero says early on in the film—a hotel from which all the characters are trying to escape. If *Marie* was especially concerned with questions of scale, *Detective* addresses itself to problems of point-of-view.

*Detective* tells three stories, each of which involves a triangular relationship. There is the love story that concerns Françoise (Natalie Baye), her husband Emile (Claude Brasseur), and her lover, Mr Jim Fox Warner (Johnny Hallyday); there is a boxing story that concerns Tiger Jones (Stephane Ferrara), his manager, Mr Jim, and his loved one—a Caribbean princess (Emmanuelle Seigner) who wants him to run away with her; finally, there is the detective story, involving Uncle William Prospero (Laurent Terzief), his nephew, Isidore



(Jean-Pierre Léaud), and Isidore's lover, Ariel (Aurele Doazan).

These three stories ricochet off one another like the three billiard balls that we see several times in the film. In fact, groups of three keep reappearing throughout *Détective*.

There is a three-part sign on the top of the building across from the hotel—a sign that advertises the audio/visual world in which we live and, possibly as well, the pornography that is so frequently associated with it.

Furthermore, if the three stories in this film are separate yet interdependent, they are separate and interdependent like the three golden globes of the hotel-lobby chandelier are separate yet interdependent: they are subtended by a fourth. In a similar way—in a way that gives to this chandelier a symbolic authority within the structure of this film—the three stories in the film are *also* subtended by a fourth. For in this film, there is also a Mafia story, except that this is less a story in itself than a surround for all the other stories.

In *Détective*, everyone needs money and, since the Mafia control the money, everyone needs the Mafia. So the Mafia Prince (Alain Cuny) and his entourage become a lurking presence within this film, with no real story of their own—but ever-present, a constant, ominous threat.

The film begins quite playfully, however, by establishing the relativity of point-of-view. A video image of an entrance to La Gare St. Lazare provides the first shot, while the excited off-screen voices of Isidore Neveu and his companion, Ariel, comment on what they see as they spy on the entrance through a little JVC video-camera. Yet, as we cut back and forth between the video image and the screen image of the video camera on the balcony outside the room in the hotel, the point-of-view of the camera is not the point-of-view that we see on the screen.

Nevertheless, through a video image we see that a couple have been standing against a side of the entrance for ages, holding one another, kissing one another. "They haven't moved all day," comments Isidore. "Because love is eternal," replies Ariel.

Then another woman appears at the entrance of the station and looks about herself, as if expecting someone. This is Françoise Chenal who has come to Paris to have a showdown with her husband, Emile, and with Mr Jim, who owes them money. Isidore gets even more excited. "Look," he says several times: "She's hesitating. *Elle hésite!*" Meanwhile, we might notice that this hesitation (as in *Sauve qui peut*) is largely created by the frame-by-frame scanning of the television image.

Why is Isidore so excited? While there is no single answer to this question, I might suggest that, since Isidore is both a character in this film and, as we shall see, also one of its creators, his excitement may have something to do with the fact that he has himself emphasized this hesitation through the step-printing potentialities of his video technology.

As a means of narrative organization (which is at the same time an investigation of the *need* for narrative organization), in *Détective*, Godard interweaves his three separate stories, each having initially a distinctive point-of-view yet each having as well a shared desire—to get some money, to get out of this place, to start life anew. Furthermore, this huge, old-fashioned hotel in which these stories take place is emblematic of the confined roles that all the characters play in this film. It reinforces our sense of the pre-determined spaces of their lives.

In fact, think of the *presence* of hotels in Godard's recent work—in *Prénom Carmen*, in *Sauve qui peut*, and even further back to films like *Alphaville* (1965) and *Anticipation*

(1966). Colossally impersonal though all these buildings are, they also provide refuge from an even more hostile world that exists outside. Increasingly in the later films, these grand hotels in which everyone is in some kind of financial relationship with everyone else, in which intricate deals take place and threats are made, these grandiloquently empty spaces with their plush carpets and golden lights seem like microcosms of the capitalistic world.

If a heavy sense of hopelessness hangs over these late films, there is still at work an enormous sense of cultural play—of intelligence and wit. For instance, think of the many quotations that abound in *Détective*. They are all part of a sense of loss that the film conveys, a sense of constant displacement from a meaningful world.

Most scenes between the characters—even the intimate scenes between Françoise and Mr Jim—are mediated by the presence of a book. It is as if, with the breakdown of social discourse, people must communicate through scraps of texts left over from the past, as we constantly hear on the soundtrack scraps of music left over from the past. Furthermore, it is certainly not a coincidence that in this film it is frequently Schubert's "unfinished" symphony that we hear.

Although there are references to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and to Gide's *l'Ecole des femmes*, both of which are associated with the plight of women (in this film with Françoise, who wants to change her name to Geneviève), the main references in *Détective* are to "disinherited" artists like Artaud and Rimbaud—"the poet who stopped writing," as the Mafia Prince says. There are also more specific references to St. Exupéry's *Vol de Nuit*; to Conrad's *Lord Jim*; and most pervasively (through the names of the characters) to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Like many of the allusions in his most recent *King Lear*, the references in *Détective* all invoke different sites of exile. In fact, even the all-powerful Mafioso Prince and his niece and nephew read about the activities of the Mafia in foreign lands *from* a foreign land!

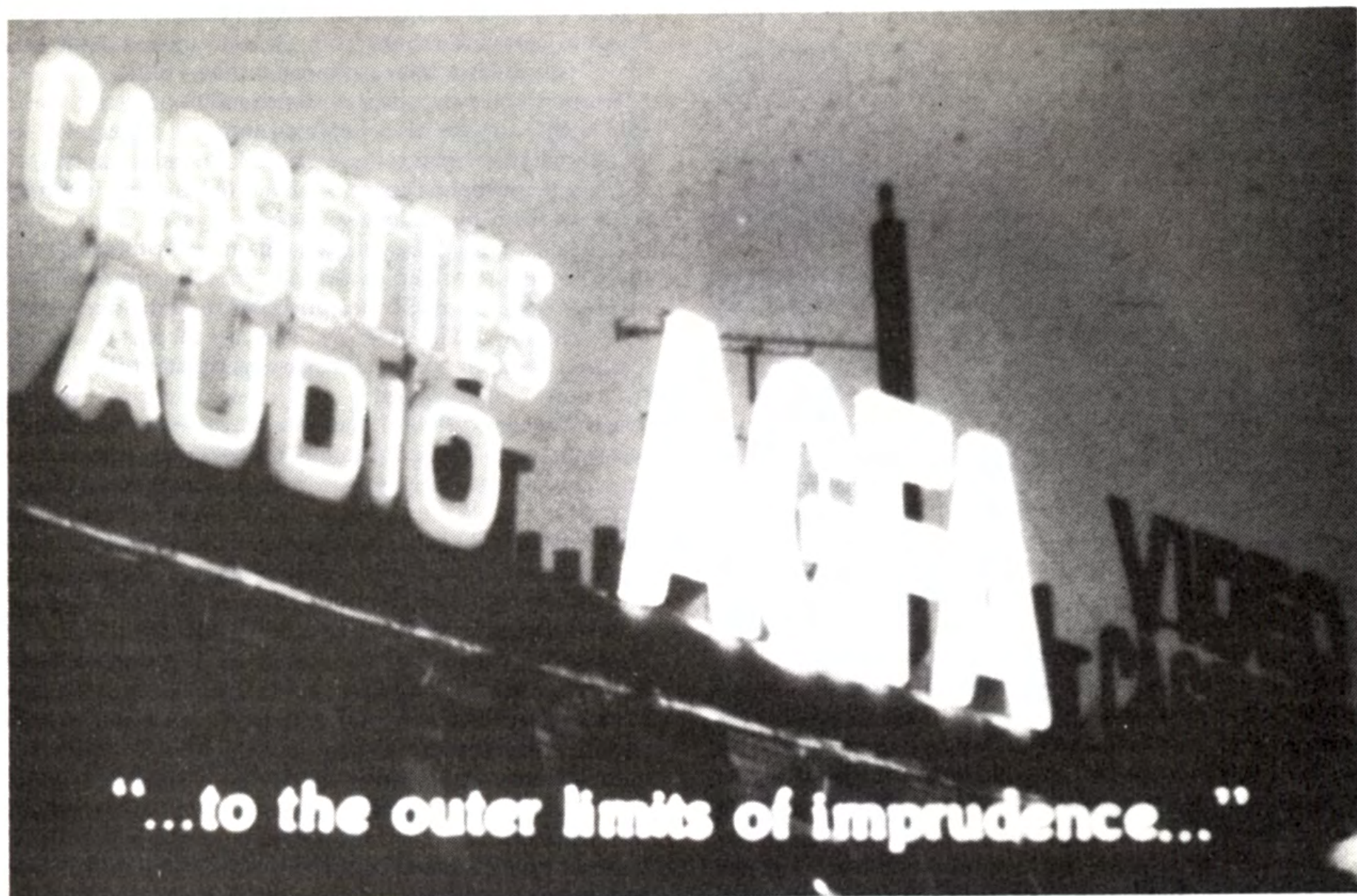
While these three different stories are equally interwoven throughout this film, it is through the detective story that we approach the theoretical centre of *Détective*. Two years ago, when Uncle William Prospero had been the hotel detective, a Prince was murdered in Room 999—a crime that Uncle William has never been able to solve. Nephew Isidore is still working on this case, as if to exonerate his defeated uncle. "Who would want to murder him?" as Isidore exclaims. "Everybody liked him." As all these stories unfold (and then re-enfold) within this film, there is no immediate plot connection between the murdered Prince and the living Mafia Prince. However, as Isidore continues his investigations, criss-crossing through the separate stories with the comic exaggeration of self-parody reminiscent of Daniel Boulanger's similarly exaggerated performance as the police inspector in *A Bout de Souffle*, the mystery of the two princes begins to come clear.

If there is a "meaning" for *Détective*, it resides as much in the texts referred to as in anything the characters actually do, as much in the apparently random nature of throwaway comments as in anything that the characters might "meaningfully" say. There is an acrostic dimension in this work that has to be puzzled out.

For instance, along with all the allusions, there are innumerable puns. While few of them survive the subtitles, they are all part of the cultural play that abounds within this film. There is a throwaway comment by Uncle William Prospero, however, that is crucial to our understanding of the film.

At one point in *Détective*, Uncle William turns to Ariel and says (according to the titles): "Language rules over this





ABOVE — The three-part sign. BELOW — The chandelier—triangles in **Défective**.





poor country but narration is the real chief." That in itself has meaning within the logocentric universe of Godard's world; but the French is even more precise: "*Le langage est le roi de notre pauvre pays, mais c'est le commentaire qui est le vrai prince.*"

From this single statement, we might extrapolate a "meaning" for the film. Of course! It is narrative as "play," narrative as "intrigue," that was killed without explanation earlier in our story—the "nice" Prince, whom everyone liked. The new narrative, on the other hand, the new "Prince" of narrative, is a heavy lurking presence, compared in one review to the Frankenstein monster.<sup>7</sup> Nobody likes him because his is interested only in money. Only he has access to the banks outside the hotel.

This is the new Prince of narrative who rules over the poor world of cinema and that makes everyone feel gloomy and helpless. At the centre of *Détective*, then, is this throwaway gag about the death of playful narrative, at the same time as we see Isidore and Ariel attempting to devise a playful narrative of their own. And the whole mystery hinges upon a mistaken point-of-view: the old Prince was killed because the murderer, looking at the hotel register upside down, mistook Room 666 for Room 999.<sup>8</sup>

The presence of inversion in Godard's work arguably is complex and involves both psychological and sociological dimensions. Since the early 1970s, however, from the point-of-view of the film artist, the changes within the structures of the market-place have turned the whole process of filmmaking upside-down. Television is now the dominant exhibition outlet, and American film-production companies have become submerged within huge international conglomerates. The unselfconsciously complex yet popular film has virtually ceased to exist.

This is why Godard feels an exile, why so many of his references invoke a world that is no longer there. The American cinema that he claims as his parents no longer exists. Mr. Fox/Warner is now dependent on the Mafia. It is no longer possible, to make a "fun" film like *The Big Sleep* which, on the level of plot, is as "unintelligible" as *Détective*, but which also gave us the sense of making itself up as it went along.

This sense of creative improvisation is exactly what Godard is attempting to re-create in *Détective*. It is not until we are well into the film that we realize that Isidore and Ariel are simultaneously characters and screenwriters in this film—as indeed, Bogart and Bacall had been, to a degree, in *The Big Sleep*. Isidore keeps feigning confidence that something is bound to happen: there are so many things that are going on! Finally, however, he despairs of an appropriate solution and demands that Ariel invent something for the film.

After a close-up on her "bemused" smile, we cut to a corridor where Ariel is scattering money all over the place. Since money has been a problem for everyone in the film, perhaps it might also provide a solution! Then we see Isidore downstairs at the bar, ordering taxis and an ambulance—"There are sure to be some deaths," he explains. The preposterous resolution of this film has begun.

A revolving door allows Godard to "invert" once again the problems of entrances and exits, so that as first Emile fires, and then Isidore, all of the wrong people get killed. Only the Prince—the supreme ruler of commercial narrative cinema—effortlessly escapes. Ariel even hands him her gun! Tiger Jones has been KOed; Mr Jim has been killed before getting a chance to read *Lord Jim*; and, shot by his nephew, Uncle William Prospero whispers to Isidore the 999/666 confusion that solves the "mystery" of this film.

The last scene shows us Isidore and Ariel describing the actions of Françoise/Geneviève as she drives off in a taxi,

following the ambulance that is transporting Mr Jim (or is it Emile?) to the hospital—uselessly, because whoever it is is dead. "And why is she doing that?" Isidore demands of Ariel. "Because," she hesitates as if remembering her lines, "because love is eternal."

There is now a brisk waltz on the sound-track and the closing titles begin. As in the opening titles all the "A's" are privileged; and so the last of the triangular structures that have informed this film appear on the screen—a triangle of "A's." Then, as the words fill themselves in, we catch the dedication to three "other" independent filmmakers from three different periods of Hollywood's history: Edgar Ulmer, John Cassavetes, and Clint Eastwood.

Finally, as if to round off the plot to this intricate series of stories, we see Isidore once again asking Ariel (as we might well be asking Godard) how she got the money for her little act—presumably, all the money that she scattered about the corridor. She refuses to tell him. "I'd rather die," she says. "Ah, no," says he in return, "that would be too many deaths!"

Meanwhile, if we are still enjoying this film, if we still love cinema, we might notice that the tune of that silly waltz hops, skips and jumps this remarkably structured film to its magnificently implausible end.

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**J**E VOUS SALUE, MARIE AND DETECTIVE GO together as two distinct views of the contemporary world—a world that is both a wonder to behold and a horror to contemplate. They go together in the same way that the last two novels by Graham Greene go together—the idealism of *Monsignor Quixote* counter-balancing the dark cynicism of *Dr. Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party*.<sup>9</sup> They go together like *Pierrot le fou* and *Alphaville* went together in 1965 and as *Deux ou Trois Choses* and *Made in USA* went together in 1966 and as *King Lear* and *Soigne ta droite* go together now.

Rigid though this way of thinking may appear to many people, this play with opposites is part of the binary operation of Godard's mind. In these two recent films, one film deals with a prohibition on intercourse; the other with the impossibilities of discourse. They are also part of Godard's extraordinary refusal to choose between these pairs of oppositions, to choose between "Mysticism" and "Marxism,"<sup>10</sup> between the personal and the political, or (as Godard explained early on in his career) to choose between the cinema of Eisenstein and that of Jean Rouch, between *montage* and *mise-en-scène*.

Godard's cinema has always forged its elements into fresh forms of synthesis—disparate though these different elements may be. Hence it is not just through a sense of the numinous that Godard's late films may be described as metaphysical. They are metaphysical in the sense that 17th-century English poets like Cowley, Cleveland, and Donne were described as metaphysical. To cite the classic words of Samuel Johnson: in the work of these 17th-century poets, "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together . . ."<sup>11</sup> So it is too, through the strategies of enforced collage, in the late films of Jean-Luc Godard.

If *Je vous salue, Marie* investigates the "mysteries" of creation; *Détective* investigates the "mystifications" of narrative—especially of cinematic narrative in the world today. Gone is the simple authority of the film director that we see enacted by a mad von Stroheim in the clip in *Détective* from *The Lost Squadron*. Real filmmaking, the filmmaking that has been killed, has become a desperate, apologetic act. In his recent interviews, even when talking about an aesthetic





Godard's **King Lear**: "a film shot in the back."

film like *Passion*, Godard talks about a sense of sin.<sup>12</sup>

And yet, like *King Lear*, more sinned against than sinning, Godard (with Miéville) remains alone, apparently unnoticed by nearly all his old supporters, the last great American filmmaker in exile, the last true *auteur*, the last master-maker of cinema. "Why did they pick me?" he asks himself about his assignment in *King Lear*. "Why didn't they pick some other gentleman from Moscow or Beverly Hills?" Because Godard remains the master, the continual innovator, the Picasso of the cinema.

Now without peers, now the acknowledged "champion" like Tiger Jones in *Detective*, Jean-Luc Godard must go on both extending and challenging the standards of the complex cinematic practice that he himself has established. □

## NOTES

1. See especially "Jean-Luc Godard: These are not the days," by Marc Gervais, *Sight & Sound*, Autumn 1985 (Vol. 54, No. 4), pp. 278-283; but also, "Le Trou de la Vierge ou Marie telle que Jeannot la peint," by Hervé le Roux, *Cahiers du Cinema* No. 367, January 1985, pp. 10-13. Readers of *CineAction!* might be amused to note that for Andrew Britton, the total impoverishment of film in the '80s can be typified by *Rambo*, on the one hand, and by *Je Vous Salue, Marie*, on the other! (*CineAction!* 3/4, p. 5).
2. For a helpful analysis of this film, see "Traces that Resemble Us: Godard's *Passion*," by Jean-Louis Leutrat, *SubStance* 51 (Vol. XV, No. 3, 1986), pp. 36-51.
3. For an insightful discussion of music and Godard, see "Music and *Vivre sa Vie*," by Royal S. Brown, *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Summer 1980 (Vol. 5, No. 3), pp. 319-333.
4. "Le Nouveau Godard," by Peter Harcourt, *Film Quarterly*, Winter 1981-82 (Vol. XXXV, No. 2), pp. 17-27.
5. "The Father's No," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, by Michel Foucault (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 77.
6. *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. by John Willett (New York, Hill & Wang, 1964), p. 71.
7. See "Défensive," by Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1986 (Vol. 53, No. 626), pp. 75-77.
8. This gag gains even more credibility if we know the documentary that Wim Wenders made at Cannes a couple of years ago. By interviewing a number of filmmakers, including Godard, about the crisis in cinema, each director posed beside a television in the room, Wenders collected evidence about the assassination of film by television—the killing of the remnants of cinematographic art by the homogenized merchandising practices of "international" television sales. In Godard's *Detective*, the killing took place because the killer, reading the hotel register upside down, misread the room number 666 as 999. Wenders' film is called, of course, *Room 666*.
9. The comparison with Graham Greene is not as arbitrary as it might appear. In *Getting to Know the General: the story of an involvement*, by Graham Greene, at one point the character Chuchu says: "If shit was worth money . . . the poor would be born without arses" (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1985), p. 114. This statement, of course, becomes the opening line of Godard's *Prénom: Carmen*.
10. See "Godard and his 'Fifth Period'," an interview with Katherine Dieckmann, *Film Quarterly*, Winter 1985-86 (Vol. XXXIX, No. 2), pp. 2-6.
11. From "The Metaphysical Poets," in *Selected Essays*, by T.S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1943), p. 283.
12. "Filming the Inside of His Own Head: Godard's Cerebral Passion," by James Roy MacBean, *Film Quarterly*, Fall 1984 (Vol. XXXVIII, No. 1), pp. 16-24.



**Les Carabiniers:** 'We've brought back the treasures of the world.'



# GODARD on IMAGERY

by R. Bruce Elder

**W**HILE SEVERAL OF GODARD'S FILMS were met with something less than enthusiasm when they first appeared, *Les Carabiniers* seems to have evoked a particularly acrimonious response, so acrimonious in fact that the film was withdrawn almost immediately after it was released. Reading Godard's response to this disheartening episode,<sup>1</sup> we discover that virtually the entire arsenal of orthodox derogation was directed against the film. The work was described as being: "confusing, incoherent and boring"; "an abominable figuration in which one has been served . . . scraps in the guise of farce"; a movie that consisted "of nothing but wretchedly filmed shots, piling up for better or for worse, and tied together by faulty continuity;" "badly processed, badly lit, bad in every way"; "photographed as if it were a piece of salvage work, in which every image expresses the author's abiding scorn for the public."

Even though the film no longer provokes quite the same degree of scorn it once did, it is still one of Godard's least liked films. After the last screening of the film I attended, I heard the film referred to as boring, pointless, offensive, unlikeable, and unwatchable. One of Canada's better-known and generally highly-regarded directors responded to the film by brusquely walking out on it, knocking things over as he went. Even people who generally admire Godard's films and whose views I not only respect but also generally find myself in agreement with were dismissive.

Even this more mildly negative response seems to me unwarranted and, indeed, distressing. I find the film extraordinarily intriguing; it, along with *Made in U.S.A.* (Godard's most inventive film), *Wind from the East* (Godard's most rigorous piece of meta-cinema), and *Pierrot le Fou* (Godard's most personal film, though I feel a little less certain in my admiration for it) are the films of Godard which I hold in highest regard. My pique over this comes not from



the damage I fear might happen by slighting the works; at this point in history Godard's films are well beyond the need for defense. Rather it results from my belief that *Les Carabiniers* is a key film in Godard's oeuvre, in the sense that the issues that the film treats are central to all his works and that in this work the problematic with which he mostly deals found paradigmatic formulation. Nowhere else in his films are such exemplary strategies for illustrating this problematic discovered.

If I am correct in this claim, those who claim to appreciate the bulk of Godard's films but to dislike this particular work must value him for reasons other than those which lead me to hold him in such high regard. If I am wrong, then my own conception of Godard's work will turn out to have been nothing more than a misunderstanding. Why I am disturbed by this generally negative reaction to the film, then, is that it puts at stake my interpretation, not just of a single film, but of the entire body of work which Godard has given us and my estimation of its significance.

Let us begin by summarizing the major tenets of the received view of the film. Most commentaries on the film begin with the description of the piece as an anti-war film; Ian Cameron's, for example, contains the claim that "*Les Carabiniers* is a series of propositions about war—it is the nearest Godard has come to making a statement movie."<sup>2</sup> While it certainly is an anti-war film of sorts, it is a very odd one indeed—one that contains many features which cannot be explained by considering it as simply an anti-war film. Indeed, what have proven for most people to be the film's two most memorable scenes—the scene in which the soldiers first attend a film screening and the scene in which they arrive home with suitcases full of photographs—could not be explained on a description of the film as nothing but an anti-war piece. Nor could the fact that the tension between the film's fable-like form and its realistic texture<sup>3</sup> is so central to the film.

The main problem with the canonical view, I would contend, is that it is based on the assumption that the anecdote the film recounts is the locus of the film's meaning. To interpret a film, on this assumption, is to explain the meaning of each of the episodes it presents. If I can be forgiven for indulging myself with a few general comments, against that view, I should like to argue that the anecdote a film presents is never (and this, I think is more than usually true in the case of Godard's films) fully analyzable in itself; rather, the meaning of a film lies in its structure, i.e. in the system of elements and relations which constitute the work.

That is why two films can recount the same anecdote (i.e. recount the same story of the same characters involved in the same incidents) and yet have different meanings. Different adaptations from the same novel and made-over versions of earlier films have surely proven that. The anecdote is merely one set of relations within a film's total structure; it is the total structure which constitutes a film's meaning. But how do we interpret a structure? The question is too general to be answered in the space of this paper, but à propos of Godard's work, I should like to point out that his work (in common with the work of many others such as Antonioni who work in a quasi-narrative mode) frequently contains what I like to call capsulizing partial structures—episodes or scenes which reflect in miniature the structure of the work as a whole. Such passages assemble in a condensed space many of the same elements which occur in the film as a whole and thus enable the spectator to form some notion about the overall meaning of the film.

One identifying trait of capsulizing partial structures is that

they are often marked off from the rest of the text in some way or another and have, therefore, the appearance of being distinct units unto themselves. The Robert Desnos sequence in *Pierrot le Fou*, the photography sequence in *Le Petit Soldat* and, I would suggest, the cinema sequence and the sequence of the return home in *Les Carabiniers* are all examples of capsulizing partial structures.

Let us assume that these last scenes do in fact capsulize the film's meaning. What then would we hypothesize about the film's meaning? To answer this question, let us begin by examining the sequence in which the riflemen attend the screening of a film for the first time. The film show begins with the projection of footage of a train pulling into a railway station and of a domestic scene of a tiny child being fed. These two scenes are re-creations using contemporary (in 1963) props, costumes and settings of items included in the first programme exhibited by those pioneering filmmakers, the Lumières.

The reference to the work of the Lumières is multiply suggestive. At the first film screening in 1895, when the Lumières showed *L'arrivée du train à la gare du Ciotat*, (the model for the train sequence the riflemen watch), the audience went into something of a panic, fearing that they might be struck by the train which, apparently, was hurtling toward them. It appears Godard had this famous episode in mind when making his re-creation, for Michel Ange's response to the image of the moving train is to cover his face with his hands. Like the spectators at the first film showing, he was frightened by the image of the moving train.

The sequence illustrates Godard's ideas on the relationship of the spectator to the cinematic image. By means of the allusion to the episode of panic which occurred at the first screening of films, Godard points out that the cinematographic image's power over the spectator depends upon its realistic appearance and its power to convince the spectator that it does not represent reality, but *is* reality—to convince the spectator, that is to say, that it possesses the same degree of reality as that of which it is an image.

There is an additional significance to the passage, an "esoteric" significance, for it depends upon one's prior acquaintance with Godard's views on the traditional understanding of the role the Lumières played in developing film styles and film forms. The early cinema is traditionally considered to have harboured two divergent ambitions, the desire to recreate fantasy and the desire to document reality. The Lumières' films are generally considered to have been inspired by the second aspiration; they are, in fact, frequently cited as defining the proto-realistic film style. But Godard has claimed that it is quite incorrect to view the Lumières as the first documentarians. He claims that they are, among early filmmakers, the true fantasists for in their work one finds the same scenes—sea scapes, street scenes and railway stations—presented in the same manner as in the work of the impressionist painters. According to Godard, the Lumières' film, although they appear on the surface to be realistic documentaries are, in fact, fantasies. A very similar claim could equally well be made for *Les Carabiniers*, underneath the realistic surface of which there is what amounts to a fable, complete with peasants, soldiers, kings, wars and excursions to exotic lands. Godard's allusions to the Lumières' films, then, indicate that he is interested in the way that the properties of film allow fiction to disguise itself as reality, artifice to pass as the natural.

The second piece screened is a scene of a baby's feeding. Like the first, Godard's reconstruction closely follows the pattern of the original Lumières' piece, at least until the feed-



ing erupts into anger, with the father cursing his little son with the terms "superboy" and "fascist whore." The inclusion of this cursing can be considered as providing a commentary on the original Lumière film, for, at one level, the scene functions as a parody of that form of artwork—and Godard seems to be suggesting that the Lumières' films are just another example of the form—which presents a purified and sweetened version of scenes from bourgeois life and especially bourgeois family life. By including the episodes usually omitted from "realistic" bourgeois art, Godard is effectively denouncing its claims to present the truth. In this way, then, the lack of any real truthfulness in the Lumières' films, of film in general and of bourgeois "realism" is implied.

But the terms in which the abuse is phrased are themselves significant. The father's use of the epithets "superboys" and "fascist whore" suggest that he is condemning the child for his feelings of grandiosity and his refusal to recognize the need to bend to his father's will. The significance of those feelings of grandiosity shall become clear shortly.

Even more clearly than the first, the third segment was chosen to illustrate aspects of Godard's view on the spectator's relation to a cinematographic image. It, too, is a recreation of an early film, one that portrayed a *femme de monde* taking a bath. Godard uses the scene to comment on scopophilia, the pleasure attained through the act of looking.

The commentary is thorough and penetrating. The basis for the passage is Michel Ange's belief that he is seeing not a film but the actual event. Associated with this is his mistaken identification of the camera's point of view with his own. These confusions lead him to believe that by changing his point of view, a different aspect of the event will be revealed.

Thus, when the woman taking the bath walks off the left side of the screen, Michel Ange leans to the right, hoping in this way to bring her back into view; when she returns and climbs into the bath he first cranes up in his seat, trying to peer over the edge of the bath tub which hides her lower parts, then climbs up on a ledge in front of the screen and jumps into the air, still trying to achieve a point-of-view from which his voyeuristic desires can be fulfilled. His attempts come to an end when he tries to pull himself up onto the screen and to enter into the image but succeeds only in bringing the screen down upon himself.

The projection of the film continues in spite of the fallen screen, only now the image is projected on the newly-uncovered brick wall. Godard filmed the entire episode with his camera facing directly towards the surface of the screen. Thus, after Michel Ange brings the screen down on top of himself, Godard's viewer, like Michel Ange, is confronted with the flat surface of a brick wall. In this way, Godard emphasizes the two-dimensionality of the film image and exposes the fact that the deep-space which Michel Ange aspired to enter is only an illusion. A film image is actually as flat and as impenetrable as a brick wall.

Throughout my analysis of the cinema sequence, I have been suggesting that *Les Carabiniers* is a self-reflexive film. In this scene, this self-reflexiveness reaches its apogee. This is hardly surprising, for the scene embodies Godard's reflection on many of the concepts which are encapsulated in the general notion of realism in film: the scene points out the illusory character of the film image; demonstrates that the apparent depth it possesses functions to support the image's illusionistic properties; suggests that the appeal of illusionistic images



Palance, Lang, Lumiere in **Le Mepris**.





ABOVE — Michael Ange at the cinema, attacking the screen in **Les Carabiniers**. BELOW — Ange with other two-dimensional images.



depends upon the spectator's scopophilic drives; and reveals how the scopophilic drive operates to forge a relationship of identification between the viewer and the camera.

But central as well to an understanding of the dynamics of this sequence is the reference mentioned earlier to the child's feelings of grandiosity, of omnipotence. For the bathing scene did elicit a truly childish sort of response from Michel Ange, for his response to the scene is like nothing so much as the response of the young boy to the sight of a woman undraped. This notion of grandiosity is central to an understanding both of Michel Ange's responses to the films he views and of the action of the pair of riflemen throughout the rest of the film.

It should be pointed out that instances of childish behaviour proliferate in the film. In one scene, Michel Ange and Ulyssee require a woman they are holding at gunpoint to stand on a chair with her back towards them. They then lift her skirts with their rifles and inspect her. When satisfied, they force her to partially disrobe and to kneel down; they set themselves astraddle her and force her to carry them about the room on her hands and knees. They are, of course, behaving very much like young boys who crawl under their mothers' skirts in order to try and sort out the mysteries of an anatomy different from their own, or who climb on their mothers' back and play "horsey." They also exhibit the gullibility and ingenuousness of a young child. When one member of the press gang tells them that he has a personal letter to them from the king, they appear delighted; when he tells them the letter requests their help in a military campaign, they are practically ready to join up. The paper the soldier shows them is clearly only a printed form.

The received view of *Les Carabiniers* has it that the purpose of this characterizing the riflemen as child-like is social comment. By so characterizing Ulyssee and Michel Ange, Godard is suggesting—or so the canonical view has it—that war is childish activity engaged in by men who do not understand what they are doing; such men, it is said, engage in war only to serve a distant master whom they deify but who does not spare even a thought for their interests.

I believe, however, that the main reason for presenting Michel Ange and Ulyssee in this has little to do with any social comment Godard wishes to make; in fact, it seems to me that the use of such playful, child-like characters in an anti-war film would be highly irresponsible. I think the use of such characters is essential to Godard's presentation of his thoughts on realism. My conclusion is based on two scenes in particular (though, I believe other scenes confirm it). The first of these two scenes is that in which soldiers from the press gang, having recognized Michel Ange's and Ulyssee's gullibility and convinced them that the king has written them a personal letter asking for their help, coax the two young men to leave with them. The tack they use to lure them into the war is to describe the booty that could be theirs. Essentially they tell Michel Ange and Ulyssee that in war, they can take whatever they want. Michel Ange and Ulyssee are amazed. As though to confirm their understanding, they list for the soldiers' assent the things they want to take. The list is a delight. It includes lighters, jewels, Alfa Romeos, Prisunics, casinos, cigar factories, free restaurant meals, women, people's spectacles (a somewhat gruesome reminder of Auschwitz), printing works, metro stations, trousers and innocent peoples' lives. In the later scene, Michel Ange and Ulyssee return home bringing with them their booty which turns out to be hundreds of pictures, all arranged into bundles according to a taxonomy which, Michel Ange explains, ensures that pictures of things of every conceivable type are included in



their loot. While the women complain about the worthlessness of these pictorial spoils, Michel Ange and Ulysse seem delighted (though, they admit, the image of Parthenon will have to be passed along to a contractor friend for repairs). To counter the reprimands of the cupidinous women, they argue, essentially, that an image of a thing is as valuable as the thing itself. The argument takes two forms—what might be called a strong form and a weak form. Rephrasing them for the sake of brevity, the strong form consists in the claim that the image of a thing belongs to the same order of reality as does the thing itself; the weak form consists in the claim that the image of the thing acts as a token of the thing that can be “cashed in” and exchanged for the thing.

Both arguments are based on a form of primary process thinking in which the mental image of an object is able to provide the same pleasure as the object itself does;<sup>4</sup> that is why both forms of the argument involve the claim that the possession of the image of something is as every bit as good as actually having the thing. This form of thinking is characteristic of the child and, in the earliest stages of mental development, is the basis of magical thinking through which the child feels that his/her desire can actually produce whatever it is that s/he desires.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the child feels omnipotent. And, feeling omnipotent, s/he recognizes no moral law.

actually establishes my claim.

For, these scenes are clearly the film's most memorable scenes. Yet, the issues they confront cannot be accommodated in the canonical view of the film.<sup>7</sup> (What earthly function would a consideration of the nature of the viewer's response to a photographic and cinematographic imagery play in a film whose intention it was to persuade its viewers that war is silly and evil?) It would certainly be a very odd film whose most memorable scenes concern issues which are quite outside those which are the basis of the film, but if our analysis of these scenes is correct, this would be the only way the canonical view could account for the presence of these scenes. Or, to put my point more directly, it cannot provide a convincing account of their presence in the film. For this reason, I believe that a canonical account of the film is, ultimately, unsatisfactory. The received view and the presence of a disquisition on realism would seem to be incompatible. Hence, if my claims are correct, the canonical interpretation of the film must be rejected. An adequate interpretation for this work must accept that the issue of realism is its fundamental concern.

While I should enjoy developing such an interpretation, I have not the space to do this here. I shall instead confirm my claims in another, less rigorous, manner, by demonstrating



Tank warfare in *Les Carabiniers*.

Michel Ange's and Ulysse's behaviour suggests this form of thinking. War appealed to them because it allowed them to have everything they wanted; that is, it allowed them to return to the omnipotent stage. This return accounts for their amorality which allows them to answer every question about their exploits with the banal comment; “they said we could,”—since the omnipotent child knows no morality. I believe that it is exactly to suggest this reliance on early forms of thought that Godard depicts Ulysse and Michel Ange as so child-like. What Godard seems to be implying in all this is the photographic image returns the viewer to the stage at which an image can substitute for an object in providing gratification. It is precisely this power to reawaken forms of magical thinking that constitutes the realistic effects of the image.<sup>6</sup>

I have wanted to establish that *Les Carabiniers*, far from being primarily an anti-war film, is basically a reflection on realism in the cinema. So far, I have demonstrated, I hope, that key scenes in the film involve a meditation on that topic. Though it might seem that to finish my argument, I should have to demonstrate that the issues raised in these scenes are the basis for the rest of the film, I believe that this is not necessary, that what I have demonstrated already not only punctures the received view of the film at key points but

that the issue of photographic realism reappears in several of Godard's other films. Before doing so, though, I should like to make a few cursory comments about the way in which an adequate interpretation of *Les Carabiniers* might proceed. First of all, one would want to explain the reason why Godard chose to embody his meditation on cinematic realism in the form of a war film. I should think that there are at least two reasons for this. For one thing, the war film, being based on historical incidents or at least rooted in an historical period, is generally considered one of the more realistic genres. Adopting this genre allowed Godard to consider the issue of realism; to be more specific, by using the realistic surface qualities of the war film (eg. high contrast black and white photography, reliance on landscapes, etc.), but incorporating them within a highly conventionalized fable form, Godard was able to demonstrate how thoroughly conventionalized these films really are. Godard, then, uses the war film to advance a rather Gombrichian argument showing that realistic works are not true to nature but rather to a set of conventions, the conventions of realism.<sup>8</sup>

The second likely reason for Godard's choice of the war film as the form in which he would embody his meditation on cinematic realism is even more complex. As we saw, Godard's thinking on the concept of cinematic realism is





Infantile exploration as a pleasure of war: Michel Ange and Ulysse in **Les Carabiniers**.

based on the idea that the viewer's response to a "realistic image" involves a form of mental activity which leads one to feel that in looking at something, one takes possession of it.<sup>9</sup> The act of looking, then, can be considered an act of appropriating. The impulse to look Godard suggests is every bit as instinctually driven, as acquisitive, as brutal, and as amoral as the soldiers' impulse to pillage. The war film, then, is an ideal vehicle for a study of that drive.

Were one conducting a thorough analysis of the film, one would also want to account for the many allusions to art which appear in the film. I believe that they serve two basic functions. Sometimes they are used to subvert the realism of the piece, to make the viewer aware that he is watching a film, that he is looking at a constructed object and not at the natural world.<sup>10</sup> I believe that they are also used to draw comparisons between the drives of these soldiers and those of the artist. An example of the first use of allusion is the use of the Mayakovsky quotation in the sequence in which the soldiers capture and execute a pair of partisans. It runs, "Someone just ordered this carnival for his pleasure, someone invented this gun . . . no one has been killed . . . simply lain down to sleep." We recognize, of course, that the words apply to the film we are watching. This, like the film's unconvincing settings and characters, distances us from the film. An example of the second use occurs just before Michel Ange forced the woman to stand on a chair while he looks under her skirts. At one point in that scene, Michel Ange pauses briefly in front of a self-portrait of Rembrandt hanging on the wall of the woman's house and says, "Un soldat salue un

artiste." Michel Ange, a man obsessed with images, recognizes in the work someone after his own heart. Those who recognize that the painting which Michel Ange looks at is a self-portrait might well catch the allusion to the self-centredness of the omnipotent phase.

But I cannot conduct such a thorough analysis. Still, the presence of similar or related concerns in other films Godard has made should help confirm my reading of this text. So, to begin: many of the same issues we discovered in *Les Carabiniers* also appear in another "gun story" made by Godard, *Le Petit Soldat*. The hero of that film, too, is a man under the sway of images. Bruno Forestier defines himself in terms of his image of himself; what matters to him is how he is seen, both by others and, more importantly, by himself. He considers himself to be a hard and mysterious person; this appearance must be kept up at all costs, even the cost of his life. His intense and passionate involvement with images influences his relationship to other people. He falls in love with Veronica when he makes an image of her. For him, beauty is the colour of a woman's eyes or the way she moves and nothing more. He even rescues himself by acting a sham—i.e. an *apparent*—suicide so convincingly that his pursuer neglects to fire his gun until he has escaped.

As we might expect, since his beliefs are supported by what we have called magical forms of thinking, Bruno is a man without loyalties to anything but his ideal of himself. Even though he admits to feeling regret at the passing of the '30s, when heroic individuals gave themselves to such noble causes as the Spanish Civil War, he cannot pretend to feeling a





"To photograph a face is to photograph the soul behind it": Bruno and Veronica in **Le Petit Soldat**.

similar commitment; as he says, he cannot pretend that a Peking tram driver is his brother.

Like Michel Ange and Ulysse, Bruno Forestier takes the image as reality itself. For him, the image is self-validating; since he seems to believe that the appearance of something is its reality, for him, its appearance must reveal its real nature. Thus, he can say when photographing Veronica, "To photograph a face is to photograph the soul behind it. Photography is truth. And the cinema is truth twenty-four times a second."<sup>11</sup> It is a small wonder, considering the degree of faith he puts in images that his ambition for his life is to open an art gallery; for his death, to die like "Thomas l'Imposteur."

Behind this faith, however, is intense doubt. The doubt arises from feelings that things and people are indefinite and inscrutable. He recognizes, for example, that his own private self is unknowable by others for he points out, using a language of gestures, that while he sees himself from inside looking outwards, others see him from the outside looking inwards.<sup>12</sup> Against this uncertainty and doubt, Bruno seeks images of both himself and Veronica that are clear and definite.<sup>13</sup>

Bruno is jeopardized by his faith in images. He believed he knew Veronica profoundly just because he had photographed her. Predictably, she betrays him. Bruno, then, is imperiled because he lives exclusively in the image world. The inadequacies of "knowledge" based exclusively on images is a constant concern of Godard. While his critiques of this "knowledge" have often taken the familiar form of the dem-

onstration that the real nature of an object cannot be discovered by examining its surface, that the soul of a person cannot be discovered in the face, the inside cannot be known from examining the outside.<sup>14</sup> But, Godard has articulated this argument in a number of ways, each with its own tenor. Sometimes, as in the case of *Vivre sa Vie*, he seems to argue that knowledge of another's inner life is difficult, certainly, but not impossible. About the divisions of that film into tableaux, he said, "... this division corresponds to the external view of things which could best allow me to convey the feeling of what was going on inside ... The greatest tableaux are portraits. Velesquez for instance. A painter who tries to render a face only renders the outside of people; and yet something else is revealed. It's very mysterious. It's an adventure. The film was an intellectual adventure: I wanted to try to film a thought in action—but how do you do it."<sup>15</sup> Similarly one recalls the line of the film "If one takes away the outside; there is the inside, if one takes away the inside, there is the soul."

But the emphasis of the film does seem to be on the difficulties of knowing another's internal world. The film begins with shots of Nana<sup>16</sup>/Anna Karina, many taken from behind her head which like so many other shots of Nana<sup>17</sup> are backlit: as a result, her face, when seen, appears only in unrevealing silhouette. The backlighting thus serves to prevent the viewer from "knowing" Nana/Anna.

Even the marvellous scene in which Nana writes a letter of application depends for its humour on the distinction between the way one sees oneself and the way another sees



him. Anna describes herself objectively, in the same way another person might. She even attempts to measure herself using her own body as a gauge. The humour and pity—for the scene is, in a very special way, a very sad one—depend upon the implausibility of the task of objective self-description—a task that Godard sees as implausible as using an object to measure itself.

More often, however, Godard despairs over the impossibility of even penetrating beyond the appearance of the other and discovering his real nature. *Breathless*, for example, is fundamentally a film about the treachery of appearances. As Patricia once remarks to Michel, regarding the deceptiveness of appearances, “when Frenchmen say just a second, they mean five minutes.” The many allusions to Cubist art in that film suggest the chaotic instability of appearances that have lost their grounding in spiritual reality.

In *Masculin/Feminin*, Godard presents a critique of cinéma-vérité. While the film primarily attacks that practice for its assumption that film can present objective truth—truth free of any “ideological contamination”—it also suggests another criticism. Cinéma-vérité, it suggests, is wrong in trusting the veracity of images and of appearances. This criticism is particularly clear in the sequence at the police inquiry. The people seem to be telling the truth; they seem to be talking directly, spontaneously, honestly. The viewer knows, however, that they are lying, knows, that is to say, that appearance belies the realities that lie beneath them.

A similar idea is suggested by a scene in *Une Femme Mariée* in which Charlotte questions Robert/Bernard Noël about acting. Charlotte is anxious about whether Robert really loves her or whether he is just acting as though he does. To determine the answer, she asks him questions about his profession, acting. Robert hesitates and stumbles in formulating his answer. Because he hesitates and stumbles while speaking, he appears to be presenting his own views. But, we must wonder, is this genuine? Is Bernard Noël actually giving us his own views? Is this appearance merely a contrivance on Godard's part? Or, perhaps, is Bernard Noël giving us his version of what he imagines Robert might respond? The answer, of course, cannot be given for one knows only the part and not the players; one knows only the appearance, not the reality.

There is a similar scene in *Une Femme est Une Femme*,<sup>18</sup> in which Alfred tells Angela that he loves her. She replies that she does not believe him. To demonstrate why, she asks him to tell her a lie. He complies with her request. She then claims her point has been proven for, she points out, the expression on his face was the same when he uttered both sentences. Alfred objects, saying you just have to know when a person is lying and when he is telling the truth. To this Angela replies, “Of course *you* know . . . but others aren't obliged to believe and it's a shame, because it means everyone is out for himself.” The comment reveals that Angela's sense of solitude—perhaps like Godard's own well-known feelings of loneliness—follows from the fact we cannot know other people's feelings since these feelings are not reflected in their outward appearances. And since the other is experienced as inaccessible, as alien, s/he is sometimes felt to be, as Angela suggests, indifferent or even hostile. Recognition of the fact that the other is unknowable results in the feeling that one is alone in the world—that in this world it's every man for himself, as the title of another Godard film has it.

A very similar idea appears in *Le Mepris*. At one point in that film, Paul says to Camille, “I'm sure you lied.” Her reply once again insists upon the fact that anyone's mental states are unknowable by anybody else: “How can you know what

I'm thinking,” she challenges. Even more tellingly, at another point in the film, Camille says to Paul, “Listen to this idiot.” Paul looks stunned and asks, “Is that a mocking smile or a smile full of tenderness?” “It was a smile full of tenderness,” Camille replies. Like Paul, the spectator feels him/herself on quicksand for s/he is left to wonder whether the words of Camille's initial statement or of her later statement speak the truth about her expression. But his wonder can never be satisfied for he has no way of seeing past appearances into the truth of images.

The importance of this idea in Godard's works explains the frequency with which he employs two formal devices. One is the use of pairs of characters with opposing characteristics. In *Breathless*, for example, Patricia is American, female, and as an aspiring journalist, respectably middle-class; Michel is French, male and a petty crook and ne'er-do-well. Again in *Pierrot le Fou*, Marianne is female, tough, hardnosed and materialistic; Ferdinand is male, soft, dreamy and idealistic. *Masculin/Feminin* is structured entirely on the contrasts and tensions between the male characters and the females. The evidence for the fact that Godard structures his films on “binary oppositions” between characters has been given too often to need to be repeated. For the purposes of this paper, allow me to say only that such structures reflect the belief that the other is remote, alien, hostile—feelings that follow directly from the belief that we know only the appearances of other people, that their real nature is unknown.<sup>19</sup>

The other feature I wish to mention has also been described often enough; despite this, I believe that its importance has not been correctly understood. The feature that I am referring to is the use of images that in one way or another affirm their two-dimensional nature. Godard employs a vast number of devices to achieve this: he incorporates graphic images or texts into the work; he uses images with a shallow rather than deep space or images in which the majority of forms lie parallel to the picture rather than intersecting it at an angle; he uses frontal lighting and primary colours to suppress the suggestion of depth by modelling; and, finally, as Henderson has so well demonstrated, he employs tracking shots in which the camera moves nearly parallel to the plane of the action.

It is a nearly universally accepted claim that the reason why Godard uses compositional devices which affirm the two-dimensionality of the image is that he wants to create a style that is politically progressive. Forms suggesting deep space, most everyone seems to agree, are inherently bourgeois while forms affirming the two-dimensionality of images are inherently non-bourgeois.<sup>20</sup>

The argument seems to me spurious. The insistent use of two-dimensional images occurs in Godard's work long before genuine progressive political concerns appear. Indeed, most of the devices we enumerated appear at least by the time of *Vivre sa Vie*: only the lateral tracking shot does not. To isolate this one device from a group of functionally related devices and to develop an aesthetic for it which depends exclusively on the fact that it appeared at the same time as Godard's progressive concerns seems to me to be a very blinkered approach.

Godard, it seems to me, uses the form to express what some might consider “petty bourgeois sentiments.” After all, two-dimensional images are images that arrest the viewer's gaze at their surface, and, it seems to me, Godard employs this formal structure to suggest our inability to penetrate beyond the surfaces of things to their essence, to penetrate beyond appearances to reality, beyond the face to the soul. □



## FOOTNOTES

1. Godard's response can be found under the title of "Taking Pot-Shots at the Rifleman" in Toby Musssman, ed. *Jean-Luc Godard, A Critical Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton Co., 1968). The article originally appeared in *Cahiers du Cinema*, No. 146, August, 1963.

2. Ian Cameron, "Les Carabiniers" in Ian Cameron, ed. *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard* (London: Studio Vista, 1967), p. 49.

3. A texture which, according to Raoul Coutard was painfully achieved. The film was printed on a special stock that eliminates grey tones, leaving a very contrasty image consisting mostly of deep blacks and sharp whites but few grey tones in between. This imparted a newsreel-like texture to the original. This material was then intercut with actual newsreel footage (v. Raoul Coutard, "Light of Day" in Toby Musssman, ed. *Jean-Luc Godard, A Critical Anthology*, p. 237).

4. A model for this form of thinking which could help make the statement somewhat less formidable to those unacquainted with it can be provided. The dream-image of a body is as capable of arousing a person as the real body is in actual life, of bringing one to orgasm, for example.

5. Actually his desire produces only a mental image of what is desired. But since, for the child, the mental image is as capable of gratifying his desire as the real thing, s/he fails to distinguish the mental image from the actual object. Since s/he produces a mental image, s/he believes s/he has produced the thing itself.

The terms of the father's abuse of the baby he was feeding can now be explained. In referring to the child as "superboy" and a "fascist whore," the father was referring to the child's feeling of omnipotence.

6. In one of his most frequently quoted statements, Godard proposes that "Film is not the reflection of reality; it is the reality of the reflection." The significance of the assertion depends upon the nature of that reality being claimed for the image. Most commentators have claimed that type of reality being claimed for the image is a material one, that Godard is pointing to the material reality of the patterns of light and dark transported on a plastic base, passed over a lit projection bulb and passed through a lens to expand their dimensions. They suggest, then, that in advancing this claim Godard was postulating a materialist theory of cinema similar to that of Eisenstein.

While I think that there is truth in this interpretation, I do not think that it is the whole truth. Against the idea that this is the whole meaning of Godard's statement, I should like to point out that Godard's work rarely draws attention to the film medium (as opposed to film forms) itself. His work rarely raises the issues that a film by a Sharits, Lawder or Gehr does. Consider *Les Carabiniers*, for example: the use of grainy textures and high contrast printing are not used to draw attention to the nature of the material of film but rather to reconstruct a style—and an illusionistic style at that. And while the use of that style might be self-referential, the reference is to the style itself, not to the material of the medium.

I believe that this particular statement, like so many others Godard has made, is plurisemic and that he is as much making a claim for the psychological reality of the images as for their material reality. He has claimed, amongst other things, that the film image is *felt* to be real, that it operates as the real thing within the psychological system. This interpretation is consistent with evidence of the nature of Godard's interests given by the films themselves.

Not the least of the merits of this interpretation is that it allows us to account for Godard's later interests in the way the cinema functions within the ideological apparatus. Ideology is false consciousness, a consciousness that accepts the viewpoint of the ruling class as true and fails to take into consideration that their ideas reflect the social function which the members of that class play. Let us suppose, as Godard claims, that the cinema, by reactivating magical forms of thought, causes the viewer to accept its images as reality. Let us further suppose, as Godard came in his later career to believe, that the nature of these images, the way these images are constructed and the ideas they embody, reflect the interests of those who own them, namely the capitalists. It follows from these two assumptions, that cinema is an apparatus which causes the viewer to accept the viewpoint of the ruling class as natural and therefore, as true. That is to say, it functions ideologically.

Godard's account of ideology, then, suggests it depends upon primary process thinking. Godard's solution to this problem of ideology, it will be recalled, was to develop forms of cinema that encouraged scientific thinking, i.e. forms of thinking which, inasmuch as they involve reality testing are secondary processes, to counteract the influence of the more primitive forms of thought.

7. Such a consideration might have a place in a modified canonical view which would claim that Godard's intention in making *Les Carabiniers* was to reflect on the genre of the war film and to revise that genre in such a way that his film would not function as a celebration of war. This has, to my knowledge, never been claimed; even so, to modify the claims about the film in this way is to concede my major argument, namely the argument that the film is fundamentally a self-reflexive piece of cinema. Even so, Godard's interest in the issue of realism would still have to be explained.

8. Hence, the use of high-contrast images: while they give the film an apparently realistic look, they actually represent a denaturalizing of the image inasmuch as they are manipulations of the characteristics of the image achieved through tampering with the photographic process. This device then serves to point up the fact that realism is thoroughly conventional, thoroughly "unnatural."

9. This is explainable in the following terms. In looking at something, one internalizes an image of it. For magical thinking, the image is equivalent to the object; in internalizing the image, therefore, one takes possession of the object.

10. The use of tape running at the beginning of the recording session including the beginning sounds of coughing and shuffling, then a voice announcing "marche militaire, premiere fois," then a muffled take, then a good one as the introduction to the film serves the same purpose.

11. A similar claim appears in *Charlotte et son Jules*. Jules says, "Charlotte, don't you realize that behind the face is the soul and as soon as you look at a girl's face you see the soul." Reality conforms to appearance, it is claimed.

12. While the figures described by his two gestures are identical; their direction is different, just as the subject is the same in both cases but is seen from different viewpoints.

13. This, really, is an intensely passionate brand of Cartesianism.

14. Technically, then, this is the secondary process critique of primary process thinking. It might be noted that it is because the primary process inadequacies imperil life that the secondary process develops.

15. Tom Milne, ed. *Godard on Godard* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), p. 187.

16. Re Nana/Anna: the names are obviously anagrams of one another. This relates appearance (Nana, the actress) with the reality (Anna, the real person). But for primitive forms of thought, which use symmetrical logic (A follows B, therefore A can be before B), the two names would be the same. And for primary process thinking, if the two names are the same, the two things are the same. In this way, too, the identity of appearance and reality in magical thinking is suggested.

17. For example, the close-ups of Nana in Episode IV (At the Police Station) and in Episode X (The Street, A Client, Pleasure is no Fun).

18. Another film that includes theatre, acting, role-playing. In this case, since the woman is a stripper, one might think one knows her naked reality. However the film points out that in a striptease a variety of overly elaborate and theatrical forms of presentation of the false self hides the real self from view.

19. This sense of the other as different and, consequently as threatening, occurs as we have seen, time and again in Godard's films. I believe that a recognition of its importance allows us to interpret an incident in *Masculin/Feminin* that seems to have given critics some difficulty. At one point in that film, Paul runs out of a cinema to use a toilet. When he enters the lavatory, he discovers two homosexuals kissing. They secret themselves away in a cubicle; he closes the door on them and scribbles, "Down with the cowards of the republic."

Robin Wood's publicly stated interpretation of the episode is that the scene is progressive; Godard, he suggests, criticizes the homosexuals for hiding their love away in bathrooms rather than allowing it out in public view. To my mind, that interpretation is indefensible on contextual grounds. For one thing, nowhere else in the film does any related idea occur. The film is not, at least as far as I can discern, concerned about the relation between private feelings and public morality. Rather the film is concerned, as its title suggests, with vicissitudes of relations between males and females which result from the sense each sex has that the other sex is very different. Given this belief, it takes courage, as Paul knows, to face up to relations with members of the other sex. Paul's act, I believe, is actually a criticism of the homosexuals for refusing to face up to the trials of such relations. Of course, there is no evidence that this is Godard's view; it simply reflects the anxiety Paul himself was feeling at the time and the difficulty he was experiencing screwing up his own courage.

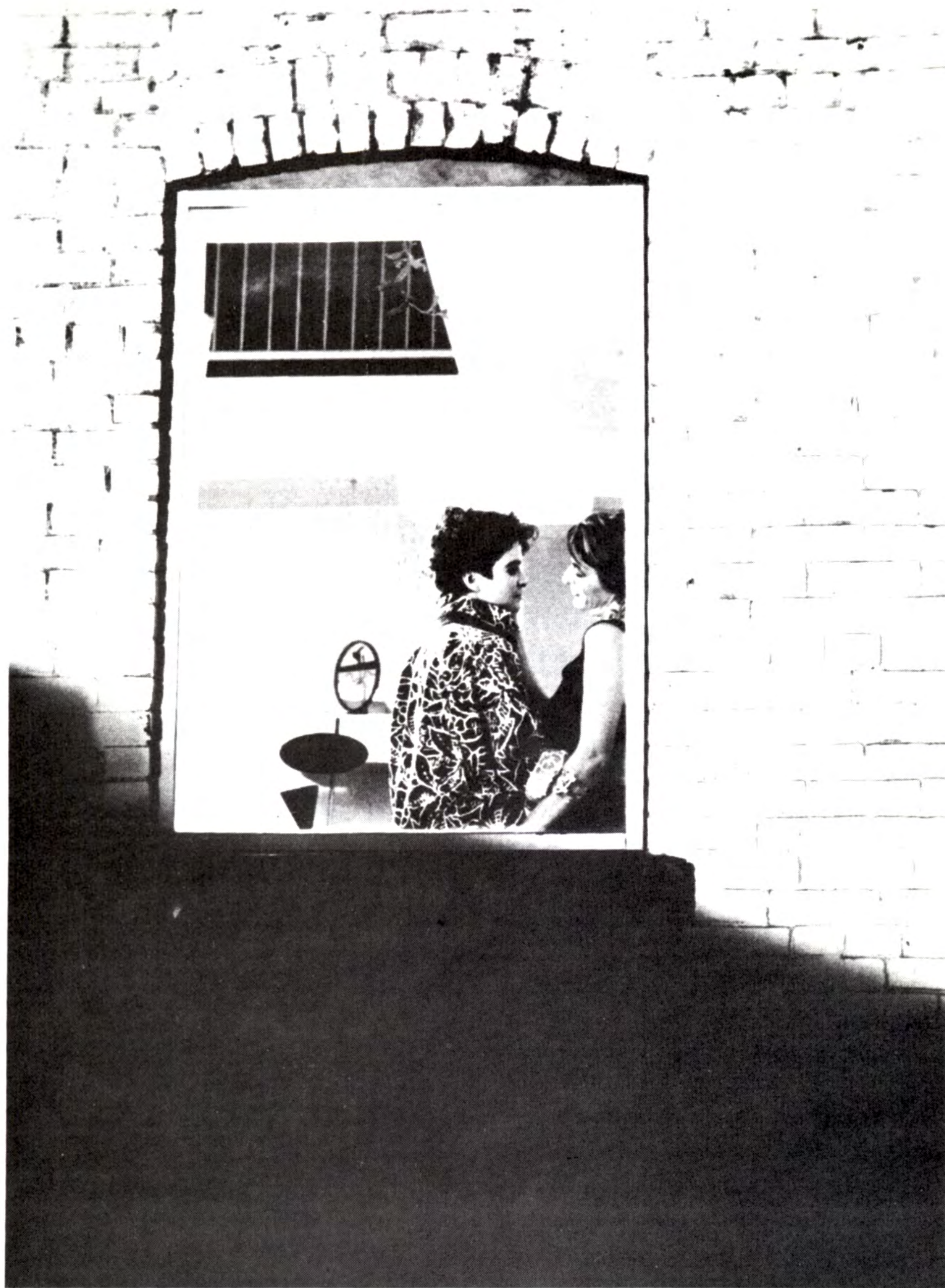
20. The argument seems first to have been advanced by Brian Henderson in his precisely argued article, "Towards a Non-Bourgeois Camera Style," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. XXIV, No. 2, Winter 1970/71. Evidence that Henderson has isolated this particular stylistic device from other functionally related devices and related its development to the evolution of Godard's concerns can be found in the fact that the article begins with the words, "Godard has developed a new camera style in his later period." Henderson's article has gained widespread acceptance.

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Interiors: alienation as state of grace in **I've Heard the Mermaids Singing**.



# IN OTHERS' EYES:

## Four Canadian Films Come Home from Cannes

by Geoff Pevere

**D**EMONSTRATING ONCE AGAIN THE CURIOUS tendency of Canadian culture to find favour at home only after being celebrated elsewhere, four Canadian features have soared homeward aloft on a tide of imported glory in the past two years. In each case, the occasion for the anointment was that annual sun-kissed symposium of ostentatious cinematic self-promotion, the Cannes festival. A bonus anointment came in the form of the particularly gourmet context: the four films in question (*Le déclin de l'empire Américain*, *Dancing in the Dark*, *Un zoo la nuit* and *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*) were selected to participate in the ultra-exclusive Director's Fortnight, an independently programmed sidebar attraction at Cannes that's perceived as one of the last holdouts of truly noteworthy fare the middle-aged festival still has to offer. A bastion as well of residual, fifth generation auteurism (which is suggested not only by the event's title, but by the row of photographic portraits of invited filmmakers displayed prominently above the entrance to the theatre), a Director's Fortnight invitation is an instant badge of international artistic worth for filmmaker and homeland alike. The conspicuous presence of these four Canadian films in this coveted program over the past two years<sup>1</sup> (*Déclin* and *Dancing* in 1986, *Zoo* and *Mermaids* in 1987) virtually guaranteed their prominent placement in both Montreal and Toronto's film festivals, and probably didn't hurt their business (or their visibility) at the Canadian box office either. That what Cannes can do.

Deservedly or not, the presence at the festival of these films has guaranteed their prominence in the national press, bolstered their international visibility, and elevated them to the status of emblematic examples of Canadian feature film production in the mid-'80s. It has even ushered in the long-dreamed of possibility that Canada, like France, Germany or Australia before it, might actually enjoy some kind of international critical vogue.

At this moment in Canada's film history, it must be noted, there is much contagious positivism in circulation. The Cannes triumphs have occurred within (and have certainly bolstered) an atmosphere of unprecedented industry activity and public support for Canadian films, and a number of the most significant and challenging works ever made in this country have been released in the past two years. In addition to the four Cannes invitees, the mid-'80s produced (among others) William D. MacGillivray's *Life Classes*, Atom Egoyan's *Family Viewing*, the collectively-directed *A Winter Tan*, Perry Stratychuk's *Savannah Electric*, Mike Jones' *The Adventure of Faustus Bidgood*, Anne Wheeler's *Loyalties*, and David Cronenberg's *The Fly*—hard proof that *this* boom, at least, is as much creative as it is economic. Whether the prevailing positivism lasts (and that's unlikely, considering the potentially devastating collective effects of Free Trade, Bill C-52, the impending reduction of the Capital Cost Allow-

ance investment incentive, and the Department of Communication's backpedalling on stronger domestic distribution legislation), it's important to note that it reigned when it did. While these atmospheric conditions have precious little to do with the individual properties of the four films under consideration here, I think it's crucial to an understanding of their social and historical prominence that it be noted. In fact, the reason I'm discussing these particular films has less to do with their individual merits and properties than their unusual (for Canadian films in Canada) level of visibility and prominence: their selection as models of contemporary Canadian cinema is actually somewhat serendipitous. They were pre-selected by the Cannes programmers, the press, and the Canadian industry.

Moreover, it is not my intention here to evaluate the merit of these films as national cultural standard-bearers, or to assess the deeply arbitrary process which brought these circumstances about. (Which is not to suggest either tack ought not to be followed. On the contrary, a pursuit in either direction would necessarily address some vital and dangerously unasked questions, such as: Why these films? And why this moment?) My purpose here is more or less descriptive: having accepted the culturally emblematic and privileged status these films currently enjoy, I want to consider these films in terms of their position (both aesthetically and ideologically) vis-a-vis certain models and conventions of "Canadian cinema" in general. In illuminating ways, these films both correspond to and abruptly diverge from conventionally-held notions of Canadian cinema,<sup>2</sup> and, whether they will be the harbingers of the long dreamed-of Northern Wave or not, they offer fascinating evidence of some illuminating changes in the way Canadian feature filmmakers approach their craft and represent their lot. If you subscribe to the notion of art as a social microcosm (and I do), these changes must reflect corresponding shifts in thought and mood on larger canvases as well.

While the critical project of defining and analyzing something called "Canadian cinema" has hardly been a continuous and unified process (quite the opposite), it has nonetheless tended to revolve around three principle issues, each of which are once again yanked onto the field by *Declin*, *Dancing*, *Zoo* and *Mermaids*: the Canadian realist tendency; the cultural distinction of French and English Canada; and the behavioural characteristics of "heroes" in Canadian films. I'd like to examine each of these films in the context of these issues not because I believe these issues are crucial or necessary to a model of what Canadian cinema is or might be at this moment (because—let's face it—it's really a whole mess of things), but because, in the terms created by the analytical framework these issues construct, we can embark on two parallel critical projects at once: first, the situation of these particularly prominent contemporary features in the context of certain established models of Canadian cinema; and second, a critical examination of the validity of these models



as instruments for a constructive definition (should such a thing exist) of what contemporary Canadian film is.

One of the dangers of a critical approach such as this, particularly when applied in the Canadian context, is that it tends to create an impression of contiguity and solidarity of purpose where factionalization and discord actually prevail. To a certain extent, each of these films is the specific product of particular influences and interests. Granted that can be said of *any* film, but something quite specific is intended when I refer to "influences and interests" in the Canadian context. In this country, where fully private feature film production amounts to a miniscule proportion of a total industry, most features have been subsidized, supported and financed by public cultural institutions and agencies. *Déclin*, for example, is a National Film Board production with Telefilm Canada support, and *Dancing* was largely supported by the CBC. *Zoo* is a National Film Board co-production with Telefilm funding, and the small budget of *Mermaids* was instrumentally supported by the Ontario Film Development Corporation. In each case, applications for funding would presumably have had to be filled out prior to production, and certain requirements would have to have been met before funding was released. Obviously, none of the myriad agencies, arts councils, or broadcasters would have contributed to anything that did not reflect positively on their particular interest. The implications of this kind (and level) of institutional compromise in Canadian cinema must have an effect on the films themselves. To a greater extent than is the case in many other countries, the Canadian cinema is largely a state-supported enterprise, and must therefore reflect, in some fashion, the interests of the state that supports it. While I'm not aware of any critical work on Canadian film that's taken the public nature of our cinema into account (and I won't go further than raising the issue at this point), it's certainly a huge fact of our national cinema's existence. (At the very least, it could play hell with a conception of auteurist intent in Canadian film.)

## Realism: The Decline of a Canadian Tradition

**A**S A FORMAL TENDENCY IN CANADIAN film, realism has been an especially well-used critical tool. Not only has it been cited to justify the Canadian propensity for documentary and journalism, it has been held up as a predominant influence on the feature tradition as well. Given the historical relativity of the term (one era's realism is another's camp), it's important to note the specificity of the term as it's been applied to Canadian film. For the most part, the realism conjured in this context is derived from cinematic and photographic models, denoting a kind of filmmaking more concerned with documentation (or an impression of it) than dramatic reconstruction. Though various theoretical musings have been formulated to explain this local passion for objective representation, most revolve around the notion of Canadians as a people so overwhelmed by nature that its representation has become our principle cultural project. There's certainly no question as to the Canadian knack for documentation: landscapes have been our predominant painterly preoccupation (only recently to have been supplanted by the popular *hyper*-realism of Colville, Danby and Bateman), journalism among our most vaunted professions, naturalism and ecology national obsessions, and documentary filmmaking our principle cinematic badge of distinction.

If documentary has seemingly come naturally (so to speak)

to Canadians, it's difficult to say whether this is attributable to cultural conditioning or state legislation. When, in 1939, the National Film Board was instituted with a mandate to "interpret Canada to Canadians," the stage was set for precisely the kind of intensive and insulated production activity that, if left alone for a generation or two, was bound to amount to some kind of tradition. But whether the Board was a product of the realist impulse or the realist impulse the inevitable by-product of the Board, the documentary sensibility has loomed heavily over the Canadian forms of representative media as well, and particularly feature films.

But even before the Board, the sporadic (and sketchily documented) history of feature filmmaking in Canada tends to verify this formulation of the Canadian propensity for realism. The earliest features made here, such as *Back to God's Country* (1919) and *The Battle of the Long Sault* (1913), were noteworthy for their breathtaking location settings and—in the latter film particularly—use of "authentic" Canadian Natives. Impressions of authenticity have remained a calling card for Canadian features. Not surprisingly, it has been the quietly industrious and market-insulated Board that has produced some of this country's more seminal features—such as *Nobody Waved Goodbye* (1964) and *Mon Oncle Antoine* (1970)—and *Ninety Days* (1985), *Train of Dreams* (1987)—and, less surprisingly, these films are characterized by their obvious formal kinship with documentary.<sup>3</sup> But even outside the Board, Canadian fiction has demonstrated a remarkable affinity for low-key, unsensationalized and (seemingly) unmediated naturalism: *Goin' Down the Road* (1970) is a classic example of this practice and, significantly, is still held up as one of the most significant films ever made in Canada. Its use of actual locations, location sound and improvised dialogue (not to mention its claustrophobic, proletarian fatalism) virtually defined a Canadian style, and it's the style that dominated and defined Canadian film and television for nearly two decades. Proof of the durability of the mold—and thus its validity as a cultural condition—lies in its recent resurrection in the hands of the Alternative Drama Department at—where else?—the good old NFB, which has produced such improvised, low-key and socially motivated dramas as *The Masculine Mystique* (1984), *Ninety Days*, *Sitting in Limbo* (1986) and *Train of Dreams*.

If the four films studied here are any indication of larger tendencies in Canadian cinema, the realist tradition is either being radically marginalized or going the way of the Montreal Alouettes. While *Déclin* evinces some remnants of the realist tradition—particularly in its splendid natural, mid-summer setting on placid lake Memphremagog—the overall impression conveyed by the films is a remarkable and unprecedentedly stressed sense of self-constructed formalism. Most noteworthy—given that the realist tradition has always held stronger sway over English than French Canadian films—is the similar strategy for de-naturalization adopted by the two English films, *Dancing* and *Mermaids*.

Essentially first person accounts of social alienation, the two films deal with the psychological withdrawals of two female characters: *Dancing*'s Edna Cormick (Martha Henry) is a mental patient looking back over the events in her life that led to Edna murdering her husband with a kitchen knife, and *Mermaid's* Polly Vandersma (Sheila McCarthy) is a bumbling temporary secretary who harbours a secret love for her employer, a chic Toronto gallery curator. While the tone of the two films couldn't be more distinct (*Dancing* is bleak and deterministically tragic, *Mermaids* winsome and wacky), their formal strategies bear remarkable similarities.

In each case, the psychological subjectivism of the worlds



presented is established by a mutual expositional dependence on voice-over narration. This sense of subjective closure is further enhanced in each case by the relatively restricted settings. For the most part, both films take place indoors, in strictly defined places: Edna is rarely seen outside of her home (where the murder takes place) or the hospital. While Polly is more often presented in social contexts, there is still an emphasis on the tightly sealed environments (such as her apartment and the gallery office) which are her principle habitats. Moreover, both films present these interior environments in a manner that enhances the preeminence of psychological over social realism: Edna's claustrophobic but immaculate home reflects the character's fragile and artificially-insulated psyche, and the vibrant, storybook colours and images in *Mermaids* evoke Polly's wide-eyed, naive wonder. In both films, there is a deliberate reversal of the context to character relationship that has prevailed in so many Canadian features of the past. Unlike Pete and Joey in *Goin' Down the Road*, for example, whose desperation, impotence and inconsequentiality is always emphasized by the drabness or vastness of their surroundings, and who thus seem like helpless products of that environment, Polly and Edna's cinematic space seems subjectively-induced: created by the characters, that is, and certainly not creating them. This de-naturalization of the dramatic environment for the purposes of psychological resonance, combined with the constantly subjectivising anchor of first-person narration (significantly, a residual documentary convention, but here used as a device for de-naturalisation) marks a significant break with the realist model of Canadian feature film practice. While it may be argued that the closed, psychologically subjective nature of the films represents a step backwards from the more socially-determined concerns of the post-documentary, realist movement (despite the fact that so many of the films—such as *Road*, *Wedding in White* and *Mon oncle Antoine*—dealt with proletarian political impotence), there's no question that it marks a step away from the realist model once held as a defining characteristic of Canadian film practice.

If the formal strategies of *Mermaids* and *Dancing* appear to have been dictated by the psychological states of the principle characters, it shouldn't be surprising that the two Québécois films, *Déclin* and *Zoo*, sit somewhat closer to conventional realist practice. Since, in each case (and particularly in Arcand's film), a broader slice of the social spectrum is presented (and, I think, broader social concerns are addressed), the overall narrative and formal properties of the films are less subject to the perceptual dominance of a single character. Since it was the representation of personal psychology that facilitated the flight from realism taken by the two English films, the less psychologically-steeped Québécois films seem somewhat more contently close to conventional realist practice.

This is not to suggest that *Déclin* and *Zoo* are stubborn torch bearers of old-school, quasi-documentary realism. On the contrary, despite their considerable formal differences, each film represents an equally significant break from the established critical model of the Québec fiction feature. If the popular preconception of the Québec feature tends toward films that are rural, proletarian and family-centred, these films either actively refuse (in the case of *Déclin*) or seriously question (in the case of *Zoo*) the elements of that stereotypical model. Interestingly, they eschew these supposedly indigenous legacies by adopting certain stylistic elements from other kinds of cinema. *Déclin*, an immaculately-rendered and densely verbal account of a crisis of cynicism faced by a

group of Montreal academics on a rural retreat, resembles nothing so much as the formally balanced and cerebrally detached films of Eric Rohmer and Alain Tanner. (And, as I shall discuss later, this process of de-culturation is not only central to the dramatic concerns of the film itself, but probably the key to its ecstatic international popularity.)

The enormously interesting and troublesome *Zoo*, which tells the story of an ex-con's attempts to battle corrupt cops and make peace with his ailing father, is the product of two predominant influences. Half an exercise in *Miami Vice*-like flash and fetishism (a program which itself is the legacy of rock video and Jean-Jacques Bienex's *Diva*), and half an emotionally-sodden tale of Oedipal reconciliation, Lauzon's studiously schizophrenic film must be considered significant historically because it deliberately situates itself on the cusp between the past Québec cinema and the (possible) future. While the macho-hysterical, leather-sheathed cops 'n' robbers part of the narrative suggests a kind of de-cultured commercial filmmaking that could be (and is) being made anywhere, the *Père Knows Best* section—with its rural romanticism and yearning for familial solidarity—couldn't be more specifically Québécois. While the point *Déclin* wants to make about bourgeois de-culturation necessitates a total refusal of any visibly specific Québécois formal or cultural references, *Zoo* engages itself in a fascinating intradiegetic struggle between culturally-produced cinematic forms.

While the Québec and English cinemas have long been suspended in critical opposition with each other, they share the realist legacy. In this context, *Zoo* and *Déclin* have stronger ties to past conceptions of Canadian cinema than do the intensely-psychologized formal strategies of *Dancing* and *Mermaids*. But while *Déclin*'s debt to realism consists of little more than an anti-psychological detachment from its characters, *Zoo* enlists conventional realism as one of the formal strategies it sends into battle: in opposition to the abruptly cut and luridly stylized neo-noir sequences, the scenes depicting Oedipal reconciliation not only express the concerns of the Québec cinema of the past, they adopt its form: flattened colours, roving cameras, and the natural splendour of great outdoors. Nevertheless, it's significant that, of the four films in question, the only one that evinces the traditional conventions of Canadian realism does so in a context of aggressive self-scrutiny. So aggressive, in fact, that the foundations of apparent transparency that realism once rested on are finally discredited. In the style war that *Zoo* creates for itself, the winner is not one form or the other but form itself. It's radical juxtaposition of styles finally endorses neither and undermines the hegemony of each. If it raises the spectre of conventional Canadian realism, it does so to knock it back down.

## Quebec and English Cinema: New Solitudes

**A**LREADY, IN OUR TRUDGE THROUGH THE realm of realism, we have tripped a note of discord between these films along linguistic lines: not only do the Québec films fall marginally closer to traditional realist models of Canadian cinema, they are more socially than psychologically centred than the English films.

While these particular distinctions are hardly traditional in terms of critical comparisons between French and English cinema in Canada, they do suggest the degree of difference that has always been held to exist between the cinematic approaches and interests of the two cultures. Particularly thanks to the convenient, 50-50 split along linguistic lines



between the four films invited to Cannes, certain questions of cultural distinction between Québec and English Canadian films must inevitably be addressed.

In the past, prevailing notions of the difference between Québec films and those of English Canada have been largely qualitative: Québec, it was said, because of its indigenous linguistic culture, was less susceptible to the homogenizing effects of American film and media, and therefore produced stronger, better movies. Not only that, the language distinction has always ensured a commercial market for an indigenous Québec cinema to develop in, while English Canadian movies were left to compete with Yankee blockbusters. Other comparisons concentrated on thematic distinctions: where the Québécois feature tended to be rural in setting, English movies seemed more frequently set in urban locales. While the family, and crises within it, comprised the principle social milieu of the Québec film, the English Canadian movie was a far more misanthropic affair, concentrating usually on loners, drifters, or people generally cut off from or at odds with any larger social unit. (Generally, in fact, Québec films tend to have larger groups of characters than English Canadian films.) Similarly, the Québec film has traditionally been viewed as more politically motivated and engaged than the individualistic, apolitical English film.

In terms of this brief and hastily sketched framework, there is less that is noteworthy about changes in English Canadian films (both *Dancing* and *Mermaids* are small-scale, intimate portraits of chronically disenfranchised individuals) than about apparent changes in Québec cinema—changes which, for better or worse, seem to be closing the traditional gaps between the two Canadian cinemas.

Initially, the predominant distinctions do hold: Both *Déclin* and *Zoo* take place—in whole or in part—in rural settings, while *Dancing* and *Mermaids* are set in cities. Both the Québec films have larger and more explicit social frames of reference, while the claustrophobic worlds of the English films are determined by their characters' feeling of isolation from social engagement. While the ultimate dramatic project of *Zoo* is the Oedipal reconciliation between the ex-con and his father, *Déclin* is less obviously concerned with matters of familial solidarity. Ostensibly, it would seem that nothing could be less valuable to this group of randy, sensation-seeking academic cynics than the preservation of family ties, but Arcand makes several suggestions to the contrary. Not only does one of the group respond to a query about his childlessness by describing the gathered group as his "family," the reason given for so much of the group's ultimately painful promiscuity is a sense of profound disconnectedness—a condition that, in the terms of the traditional Québec film, would easily be cured by the feeling of belonging created by family ties. Thus, while the family is not ostensibly present in *Déclin*, its absence is cited as a reason for the characters' profound emotional torment.

*Déclin*'s relationship to politics is similarly mournful and resigned: where many Québec features in the past (including others by Arcand, and many made by Gilles Groulx, Jean Pierre Lefebvre and Gilles Carle) dealt specifically with the political condition of Québec, very few recent features from the province have. But once again, the absence in *Déclin* is a loaded one: for Arcand, whose early features were politically-oriented black comedies, one of the defining characteristics of these academics is their complete indifference to local political concerns: all the films' references are to figures of so-called "universal" cultural import: Rousseau, R.D. Laing, Woody Allen. Politically impotent intellectuals whose withdrawal into sexual hedonism marks a negation of political

responsibility (and who look Statesward over Memphremagog wondering aloud about the aesthetics of nuclear apocalypse), *Déclin*'s characters are casualties to bourgeois deculturation: they exist in a class for which all local interests have been supplanted by bogus "universals." In an irony somewhat typical of Arcand's eloquent cynicism, these characters vent frustration over their impotence in overdetermined displays of sexual promiscuity.

*Déclin* is a film in which present pain is presented in implicit opposition to past pleasure. Its troubled presences yearn for blissful absences. Therefore, while it appears to explicitly demonstrate none of the characteristics of the traditional Québec feature, it obviously yearns for the values they represent.

*Zoo*'s juxtaposition of deculturated, contemporary noir technique with the pastoral, identifiably Québécois simplicity of the Oedipal reconciliation sequences would seemingly indicate a similar longing for similar things lost. The emotional centre of the film is certainly the mending of emotional bonds between father and son, and this is expressed in the most conventional Québécois terms—and never more eloquently than in the sequence when the two go fishing on a remote, fog-enshrouded lake. Significantly the parallel story (Marcel's torment by the cops) is rendered in terms that, formally and thematically, couldn't be more at odds with the fishing scene: the urban-set account of Marcel's battle with the police is individualistic nihilism of the flashiest sort, and—were it not for the flash—much closer in its concerns and influences to the traditional models of English than Québec cinema.

Clearly, despite their drastically different ways of representing it,<sup>4</sup> the French films share a sense of something that has passed—or, in *Zoo*'s case (which ends with the death of Marcel's father) is passing. Something's happened which has discredited or made irrelevant the culturally distinguishing interests and values of the old Québec cinema, and is pulling the contemporary model closer to the apolitical cynicism of the English Canadian feature.

## Character Definition: Losing and Loving It

IF THERE HAS BEEN A COMMON GROUND shared by the Québec and English Canadian cinemas, it is that plot of dramatic territory called character definition. For reasons too numerous and complex to elaborate upon here (though they will be apparent to anyone who's studied Canadian literature or painting, which are similarly inclined), the single unifying thematic characteristic of Canadian feature films is a fixation with alienation and failure. In a genuinely daunting number of Canadian films made over the past 30 years, the principle concern has been with people who either try and fail or fail to try at all. If the American cinema reflects the American Dream by constantly reprocessing the spectacle of the realization of ambitions and fantasy, Canadian films emphasize the futility of dreaming and the folly of ambition. If the American cinema is about overcoming obstacles blocking the path of ambition, the Canadian cinema is about the insurmountability of those obstacles. If the American cinema's principle talent is the perverse efficiency with which it presents all social tensions and contradictions as ultimately resolvable, the principle inclination of the Canadian cinema is the presentation of seemingly solutionless problems.<sup>5</sup>

The sociopolitical implications of this pervasive fatalism are fascinating if (for Canadians anyway) distressing: they suggest a society unconvinced of the transgressive potential





ABOVE — The dead zone: cynicism celebrated in **Déclin**. BELOW — Apocalypse anytime: biding time before oblivion in **Déclin**.







ABOVE — Boy toy: an accessory to Oedipal reconciliation in **Un Zoo la nuit**. BELOW — Montréal vice: universal form struggles with local content in **Un Zoo la nuit**.





of either individual or collective action, a society resigned to the oppressiveness of its institutions, a society which is collectively convinced there's nothing it can do about it and no point in trying.

In terms of this model, the four films under discussion here indicate both progressive and regressive developments. Significantly, three of the films—*Dancing*, *Mermaids* and *Zoo*—suggest a long overdue shrugging off of this culturally conditioned state of social impotence. However, while all three present characters overcoming circumstances that, in earlier Canadian films, would have crushed them completely, the victories might be ultimately Pyrrhic. Edna Cormick, for example, appears to have won a release from her domestic (and ideological) prison by murdering her husband, but it's clear that the freedom has come borne on the wings of insanity. By the end of the film, Edna's celebration of liberation is conducted in unseen isolation—in the last shot she literally dances in the dark. Similarly, Polly seems to overcome one set of delusions only to embrace another. By the film's end, she may have been dangled at the abyss separating fantasy and reality (she's learned the woman she loves is an opportunistic fraud), but it's her right to fantasy that wins out. In other words, Rozema's film takes the state of chronic delusion that once represented failure and alienation and renders it as something practically worth crowing about. The condition is the same, but the lens is rose-tinted. Polly's still an archetypically Canadian loser, the difference is this film is *proud* of her for it.

In keeping with the structured schizophrenia of *Zoo*, Marcel seems to win one victory hands down (the one over the cops) while only ambivalently surmounting another. By the end of the film, the long-sought after reconciliation with his father has finally taken place. (And, moreover, in the context of a bizarre, morally skewed scene in which father and son sneak into a zoo at night and kill a trapped elephant.) But this is almost immediately followed by the old man's death, and the fascinating ritual Marcel performs on the body: after anointing his father's naked body, Marcel removes his own clothes and climbs in bed with it. While the implications of this (and of the generally troubling ambivalence *Zoo* demonstrates towards homosexuality and homoeroticism) deserve a deeper reading than I can indulge here, the ending does nevertheless suggest a sense of paralyzing loss—particularly since the death has come so shortly after Marcel's apparent liberation from the clutches of his convict past: what is Marcel to make of this freedom now that the central object of his desire—his reason for that freedom—is dead? The conclusion to me seems closed, final and, once again for a Canadian film, resigned to nothingness.

In a manner more sophisticated, subtle and disturbing than *Mermaids*, *Déclin* also renders social alienation and political impotence as virtues. Like Polly, Arcand's cynical, bed-hopping academics are losers presented as winners. But unlike Polly, whose social alienation is rendered as a product of an endearing and non-threatening eccentricity, Arcand's characters are able to rationalize, argue and defend their profound sociopolitical irrelevance. It is another of Arcand's bitter ironies that these people, who are steeped in historical and cultural knowledge, only invoke this knowledge to justify their present apathy and cynicism: here, in other words, a lot of knowledge is a dangerous thing. But if Arcand's characters resemble other Canadian losers in terms of their ultimate sociopolitical irrelevance, they differ in that their class position has allowed them to *choose* irrelevancy. Which introduces another point: For reasons that (so as far as I know) haven't been seriously dealt with critically, the Cana-

dian cinema has had a curious (given that this is largely a middle class culture) fixation on rural and working class characters. When the Pete and Joeys of these earlier films failed to realize their dreams (which were usually dreams of middle-class coziness), it's because those dreams contravened the dreamers' actual position on the social hierarchy. Thus many Canadian films, in their constant fixation on the nullifying of working class aspirations can be read as class texts: accounts of working class ambition being crushed under middle class hegemony. Arcand's characters, on the other hand, are firmly upper middle class. (Even their presence in a rural setting is presented as a willed luxury—in other films that deal with working class losers, the rural environment is something that's escaped from.) They've got everything they want, and have diverted all their dreams and desires into immediate and hedonistic pursuits. If earlier Canadian losers lost because of what they didn't know (i.e., that their class position made their dreams untenable), Arcand's characters know it all—and remain losers. The difference is (and it's a significant one) choosing to lose.

Ultimately, *Déclin* trades in the romanticization of resignation—it's an apologia on behalf of people who have everything and contribute nothing. (Or who don't want to give any of it up.) While the enormously skilled Arcand has directed the film so that it can be read as either a critique or a celebration of upper middle class apathy, the unprecedented international success of the film must tip the scales of emphasis in the latter direction. Certainly, with its abundance of erudition and dialogue, and its generic pedigree as a Rohmeresque "art film," the greatest number of the film's enthusiasts must reside in the very class *Déclin* is about: affluent professionals with liquid assets and middlebrow interests. Whatever one wishes to suggest about the film's potential subversiveness, certainly the class of people the film represents aren't feeling attacked. This might also explain the huge international interest in the film (and why an American, English-language production is in the works): *Déclin* has been criticized for its total disregard for cultural specificity (Quebec is never mentioned), but this misses the point entirely—it's about people who are defined less by their geopolitical context than their class position. The interests and issues expressed by the characters are the interests and issues of (begging your pardon) "yuppies" everywhere: sex, acquisition, power, careers, pleasure. Therein lies the key to its success. Were it any more specific about its context, it probably never would have left Quebec.

## Postscript: The Price of Glory

**T**O ATTEMPT TO EXTRAPOLATE A SINGLE, sweeping conclusion from these random musings about four contemporary Canadian film successes would not only be misleading and reductive, it would ultimately fail. Not only that, it might be immediately rendered irrelevant by the constantly shifting fates of state film policy this country's cinema is unfortunately at the constant mercy of—and always has been, which has played hell with the development of critical models and definitions. Throughout this piece, I have called upon certain vaguely defined models against which to examine these four films. The problem with this approach isn't just that these models are to a large part deductive and jerrybuilt (they come not from a single manifesto, but have been retroactively assembled through my readings in Canadian cinema over the past decade), but that attempting any kind of critical model in a context as chronically uncertain as this one is bound to flirt with escalated rates of obsolescence. Quite simply the production conditions





Dancing with myself: reason sleeps and realism dies in **Dancing in the Dark**.



under which many of the classic films were made, and in which much of the past critical work was done, have altered completely. Furthermore, there's nothing to prevent the current industry conditions, of which *Déclin*, *Dancing*, *Mermaids* and *Zoo* are products, from altering completely again. I have evoked these models neither to denounce or endorse them (for I believe they had much validity at the time they were written and in terms of the films they addressed), but merely to get an idea of where, in critical terms, the contemporary Canadian cinema stands in relation to its past. Certain things certainly stand out:

In terms of the documentary legacy and the issue of realism, Canadian cinema appears to have moved towards a more self-conscious formalism (not only does this apply to the four films discussed here, but also to others like *Family Viewing*, *A Winter Tan* and *Life Classes*). Corresponding with this is a severe narrowing in terms of social perspectives represented. In the English cinema particularly, social context seems to have given way almost completely to an emphasis on intensive psychological portraiture.

In terms of the French/English distinction, there appears to be a homogenizing process underway. The site of this process, significantly enough, seems to be the psychological trauma of the individual: while *Zoo* and *Déclin* present broader slices of the social spectrum than do the intensely interiorized *Dancing* and *Mermaids*, they are still far more concerned with psychological and emotional crises than they are social or political matters. Across the board, in fact, Canadian film seems less politically engaged today than it ever has been.

If there is any area where past critical models of Canadian cinema still ring with relevance and validity, it is in the formulation of character in Canadian feature films. Losers (to use the word most often used to describe characters like this) still prevail. These films are still populated largely by people who are defined by their inadequacy to break out of their misery or alter the courses of their lives. The main difference between losers then and now is that, these days, losing is presented as a heroic choice. Polly's delusions rule the day at the end of *Mermaids*, *Déclin*'s burned-out academics become international art house pets. This is what leaves the mind reeling: now that the Canadian cinema seems poised finally on the brink of international recognition, the films that have earned passage are among the most solipsistic and socially disengaged this country has ever produced. □

## Notes

1. Not that Canada hasn't gone to Cannes before. Clay Borris's *Alligator Shoes* was invited to the Director's Fortnight in 1981, Pierre Perrault's *La bete lumneuse* participated in 1982, and Denys Arcand is a Director's Fortnight veteran. But never before have this many Canadian films been invited in so short a time.
2. It should be stressed that the "models" I refer to here have actually been arrived at somewhat deductively. They really exist only as tendencies in published critical thought on Canadian cinema. For the most part, they have been constructed from texts written during the mid to late-'70s, a curiously prolific (and since unmatched) period in both popular and academic writing on Canadian film. As I suggest in more detail further on, much of the discussion crystallized around the issues of realism, French/English cultural distinction, and the dramatic presentation of character. (Much was also made of auteurism, but that didn't seem particularly pertinent or useful in terms of the present investigation.) A fairly substantial idea of what I'm talking about can be gleaned from any of the following: *Canadian Film Reader*, edited by Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson (1977: Peter Martin Associates Ltd.); *The Film Companion*, by Peter Morris (1984: Irwin Publishing); *Marshall Delaney at the Movies*, by Robert Fulford (1974: Peter Martin Associates Ltd.); *Movies and*

*Mythologies*, by Peter Harcourt (1977: CBC Publications); *Self Portrait*, edited by Pierre Veronneau and Piers Handling (1980: Canadian Film Institute); *This is Where We Came In*, by Martin Knelman (1977: McClelland and Stewart Ltd.); *Take Two* by Seth Feldman (1984: Irwin Publishing).

3. In at least two instances, the intimate relationship in Canada between the Board, documentary and dramatic features has been vividly demonstrated: both 1964's *Nobody Waved Goodbye* and 1984's *The Masculine Mystique* (the first production of the potentially instrumental Alternative Drama Program) started on paper as documentaries. Both evolved into feature films during production (and in spite of Board policy).
4. Interestingly, a curious kind of affinity between these filmmakers and their films is suggested by the brief appearance in *Zoo* by Arcand. He appears as the masturbating peepshow patron Marcel throws out of his former girlfriends' booth.
5. Some titles to consider: *Nobody Waved Goodbye* (Don Owen, 1964), *Le chat dans le sac* (Gilles Groulx, 1964), *Le vrai nature de Bernadette* (Gilles Carle, 1971), *Mon oncle Antoine* (Claude Jutra, 1970), *Peperback Hero* (Peter Pearson, 1973), *The Only Thing You Know* (Clarke Mackey, 1971), *Wedding in White* (William Fruet, 1972), *Goin' Down the Road* (Don Shebib, 1970), *The Rowdyman* (Peter Carter, 1972), *Les Ordres* (Michel Brault, 1974), *Shivers* (David Cronenberg, 1975), *Les Bons Debarras* (Francis Mankiewicz, 1979). In terms of Canadian loser-heroes, this is but a small fraction—there are literally dozens more.

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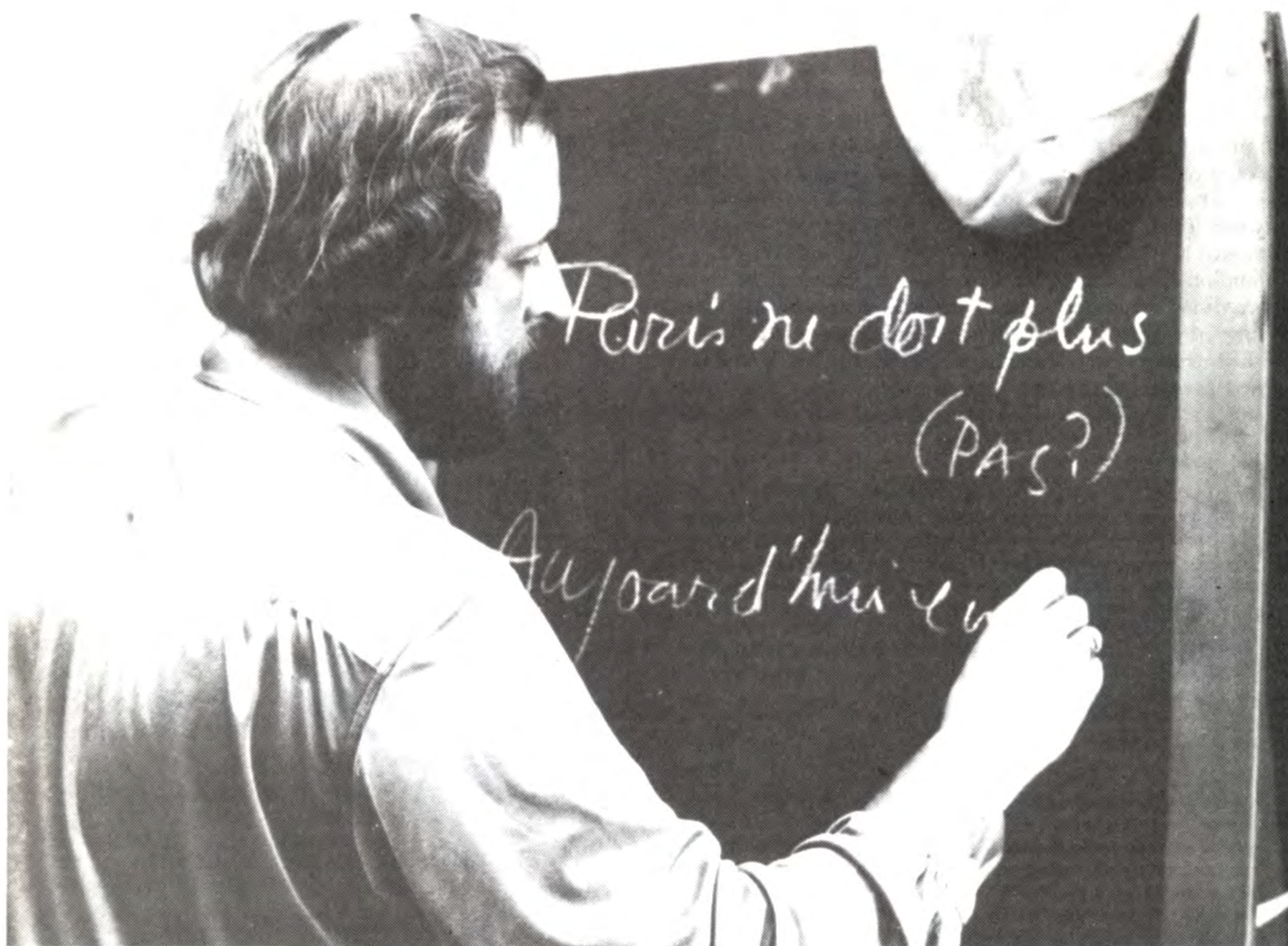
# EXQUISITE NOSTALGIA:

## Aesthetic Sensibility in the English-Canadian and Quebec Cinemas

by Deborah Knight

**CERTAIN** theoretical problems arise in the consideration of the cinemas of English Canada and Quebec. These problems include not only questions of nation and region, but also questions concerning the various cinematic modes, especially the documentary and experimental practices, which are characteristic of these cinemas. The theoretical problems include representation, suture, narrative, space and time, and the identification of an object of desire in relation to these various films and filmic practices. What I particularly want to examine is the aesthetic sensibility produced by these cinemas, a sensibility which I will call exquisite nostalgia.

In "The Rhetoric of the Image,"<sup>1</sup> Barthes observes that there is a fundamental distinction to be made between still and moving pictures, between photographs and films. Barthes argues that the photograph combines spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, or the sense of the "here-now" and of the



**Le vieux pays où Rimbaud est mort** (Jean Pierre Lefebvre, 1977).



"there-then."<sup>2</sup> This paradoxical quality is in no way a "presence": the photograph is not an illusion but stands as evidence that "*this is how it was.*" Barthes maintains that photographs represent a reality from which the spectator is sheltered. The sense of temporal distance between the spectator and the photograph is said to ensure a more objective observational consciousness than is conventionally permitted by the cinema. This difference has to do with the particular nature of cinema. Because the experience of watching a film occurs so uncompromisingly in time, this particular nature is on Barthes' account the cinema's temporality. Thus Barthes suggests that the sense of having been there, which he ascribes to the spectator's relationship to photographs, gives way with the cinematic spectator to the sense of being-there. The cinematic spectator does not observe but participates; the viewer is carried along in time with the developments of narrative. Cinema, unlike photography, is an illusion because it allows for the belief in the presence of the filmic representation, and because the spectator's relationship to the temporal extension of film is not simply observational but projective. Barthes calls this projective tendency in the cinematic spectator a "fictional" consciousness.

This, at least, was what Barthes argued in 1964, when he was caught up in the "euphoric dream" of a scientific cultural studies based on the model of Saussurean linguistics. At this time, despite his consistent interest in developing a semiotics of the visual as well as of the verbal arts, Barthes nonetheless felt it necessary for the scientificity of the semiotic project to reduce the visual to the codes and systems of structural linguistics, to reduce the visual to the order of the linguistic. So one might be inclined to argue that his distinctions between photograph and film, outlined above, are not beyond critique. Certainly it is obvious that the privilege of the photograph as locus of non-illusion is dependent upon a sense that the photograph is non-narrative, that it does not "tell a story," or that our participatory relationship with it as spectators does not "develop in time." Similarly, Barthes' "spectatorial" consciousness, which is opposed to the "more projective, fictional" consciousness of the cinematic spectator, depends upon his conviction that the spectator's experience of a photograph is *not* projective. For the purposes of this essay, I intend to keep Barthes' distinctions provisionally, not because they are necessarily

correct, but because they offer a framework to think with.

The intuitive sense Barthes has about photography, that it possesses a unique quality combining the "here-now" and the "there-then," is one way of approaching the problem of representation in general. Photography, as a mechanical, iconic mode of representation, has since its discovery consistently been used to offer a record of the "real," a documentary record whose statement, "This is how it was," is—as Barthes has recognized—precisely, doxa. But the distinction between photography and cinema is not absolute because to be absolute would mean to oversimplify—by seeming to make absolute—the opposition between the spatial and the temporal. For cinema is as intimately bound up with the paradox of the spatial and the temporal as Barthes believes photography to be. Cinema also could be characterized as combining the qualities of the "here-now" and the "there-then." Like photography—and the point has been widely discussed—cinematic representation makes present an absence, depends upon the absence of that which it presents. Cinema is not necessarily any less representational than photography, even if we follow Barthes' sense of the dichotomy between presence and representation, between the lived present experience of the cinematic spectator and the observational, distanced experience of the past apparently characteristic of the photographic spectator. Indeed, the tension which arises from the paradox between there-then and here-now, between experience of space and experience of time, seems to me to be evident in various practices of the Canadian and Quebec cinemas in a way which might be said to mark the identity of these cinemas.

**FOR** the Canadian and Quebec cinemas, which historically are tied to a tradition of documentary practice, Barthes' remarks allow the possibility to think the opposition between cinema as iconic (therefore spatial) document and cinema as narrative (therefore temporal) representation. This opposition could be seen as the struggle between the desire for presence, non-illusion, science, objectivity, documentation, on the one hand, and the desire for representation, illusion, art, the subject, creation, on the other. Not that this is by any means a monolithic series of antitheses, but a continuum against which particular films can be considered. Whether we are speaking of English-Canadian documentary or

experimental cinema, or about Quebecois narrative cinema from the early sixties or the late seventies, I will argue that the tension between these opposing desires produces a particular effect on the spectator. I want to call this effect "exquisite nostalgia." By exquisite nostalgia I am attempting to describe the peculiar, sad pleasure which seems to me to be present as much in *City of Gold* (NFB 1957) as in *Le Vieux pays où Rimbaud est mort* (Lefebvre 1977), as much in *Corral* (NFB 1954) as in *Canadian Pacific I & II* (Rimmer 1974-75).

How can the idea of exquisite nostalgia contribute to an understanding of the way in which various practices of filmic narrative affect spectators? Precisely, I would suggest, insofar as the Canadian and Quebecois cinemas do not, on the whole, produce in spectators the same sense of plenitude or completeness—Barthes' "presence"—that, arguably, Hollywood cinema endeavours to produce. If it can be argued that Hollywood cinema aims to create an "imaginary unity," binding the spectator to the cinematic image/narrative in an undifferentiated ongoing present, the Canadian and Quebec cinemas seem, in contrast, consistently to reinforce a sense of difference rather than a sense of unity. It is this non-unity which Barthes' joining together of the there-then and the here-now so clearly captures. And whether we are considering *Paul Tomkowicz, Street Railway Switchman* (NFB 1954), *Là où ailleurs* (Leduc 1969) or *Les Maudits sauvages* (Lefebvre 1971), there is a tension between the narrative, temporal experience of each film's presence and the absence of that to which the films refer. This is a tension which, in many cases, exists within each film's narrative organization. In *Là où ailleurs*, the tension is manifested between the quiet, pastoral shots of the countryside and small rural towns, on the one hand, and the frantic, noisy, disruptive shots of dollar bills, fighter planes and primary industry, on the other. The object of the film's desire is the pre-industrial landscape, and it is a desire threatened by the expansion of capital. In *Les Maudits sauvages*, the tension between now and then, here and there, is central to the film's narrative structure. Though the film is essentially organized by the juxtapositions of anachronisms, nonetheless, through its use of music, pace of editing, long takes and minimal camera movements, it creates a sense of longing for something which can scarcely be spoken but is figured by the horseback ride from the Indian community to the French-



Canadian settlement. In *Paul Tomkowicz*, there is again an almost unspeakable object of desire which has to do with the simple beauty and the unspectacular regularity of human (perhaps even social) actions.

That these various nostalgias are both idealistic and quirkily utopian cannot initially be an issue. What the films present to the spectator is the image of a lost or almost lost object of desire. Exquisite nostalgia is an aesthetic response to the present image of the endangered object of desire. And if it has been argued that Hollywood cinema's inevitable object of desire is the fetishized, objectified female protagonist, the object of desire in Canadian or Quebecois cinema is more often something conceptual and abstract, something of aesthetic, historical, or humanist significance.

**THE** peculiar position of women in many of these films signifies the ideological distance between the Canadian and Quebecois cinemas and the Hollywood cinema. Granted woman is an object of desire in, for example, *She is Away* (Elder 1975)—but here too at an extreme level of abstraction, one which is particularly bound up with the temporal, with waiting, and thus, with deferral. In *Goin' Down the Road* (Shebib 1970) woman is not so much an object of desire as a hated object of desire, one which must be eliminated from the narrative. Woman might arguably also be the hated object of desire in *A Married Couple* (King 1969), if desire did not seem too strong a word. Some of the most embarrassing moments in the English-Canadian cinema of the 1960s concern the hapless representation of sexual relationships. In *Nobody Waved Goodbye* (Owen 1964), it is impossible to imagine the film's narrative without the central relationship between Peter and Julie and equally impossible to know quite how to work with that relationship.

Women are seldom the nostalgic object of desire: exceptions to this generalization would have to include Manon in *Le Chat dans le sac* (Groulx 1964) and Geneviève in *Entre la mer et l'eau douce* (Brault 1967); perhaps the most paradigmatic example is the "protagonist" of Gruben's *Central Character* (1977). But even these examples are not straightforward. It seems possible to argue that Manon is not *in herself* an object of desire, but figures or symbolizes something about Claude's desire for the simplicity and regularity of the winter country landscape; and as for *Entre*

*la mer*, the protagonist's sister is also an object of desire, somewhat disruptive to the narrative's "love story" because of her sexual and social independence in this patriarchal community. She too figures something about the rural landscape and way of life which must be left behind for the experiences of the city. Far more often, and this is especially clear in documentary and experimental films, women are either: simply present but lacking in semantic value; absent; present but totally subordinated to the male protagonists; present as spectacle (and I would include *La vie revêe* [Dansereau 1972] in this group); or present because they are either filmmakers or wives of filmmakers. The nostalgic object of desire is much more bound up with questions of space and time, landscape and narrative duration.

**THEMATICALLY,** visually, technically, the experiences of space and time have been central in both the Canadian and Quebec cinemas. Usually developed in relation to land-, city-, or snowscapes, characters are consistently presented in relation to an environment which often overwhelms them but which always contextualizes them. Long takes are frequently used to couple the sense of (sometimes a vast) extension in space with the desire for temporal duration: we see this in *L'Hiver bleu* (Blanchard 1979) and Poole's *Strass Café* (1981), and also, brilliantly, in the final snowscape of Mallet's *Journal inachèvé* (1982). The long take seems to transform space into time, extension into duration. Conversely, in *City of Gold*, for instance—a film whose very theme is nostalgia—both the "live-action" shots of Dawson City and the archival photographic material contribute to the transformation of time into space, the lost time of the past into the nostalgic remembrance of that past in the security of the present. Both of these transformations nonetheless capture a finitude, an incompleteness, which marks the failure of what Barthes calls presence. The Canadian and Quebecois cinemas seem to be marked by the recognition of incompleteness, by their impossible desire to combine complete temporal duration with complete spatial extension.

So not only are the Canadian and Quebecois cinemas marked by their inscription of difference—by the failure or refusal to produce the sense of an "imaginary unity"—but also profoundly by their inscription of deferral, by delay of pleasure, a pleasure which can only be experienced insofar as it is

drawn out in time. This might be experienced either as the spectator waiting for something or as the spectator's sudden realization that he or she does not want a particular shot/sequence to end. I frequently find myself waiting, in films like *L'Hiver bleu*, for a shot of the countryside, for a snowy landscape. In *Journal inachèvé*, I wait for shots of the interior of Mallet's apartment, especially tracking shots in the hallway which slowly examine the various rooms, the pictures on the walls. Conversely, I am reluctant to see *Surfacing on the Thames* (Rimmer 1970) or *Canadian Pacific I & II* end, reluctant to see some of the more exquisite shots in, say *Le Vieux pays* or *Avoir seize ans* (Lefebvre 1979) end: I could mention specifically, in *Le Vieux pays*, the first shot when Abel passes Ann in the Tuilleries, or the penultimate scene when they look out over the Mediterranean together—a shot which, of course, finally "turns into" the St. Lawrence. Somewhat surprisingly, the experimental films with the most button-holing character (*So is This* [Snow 1982], *Dripping Water* [Wieland 1969], *Wavelength* [Snow 1967]) are also particularly caught up with the experience of deferral, only in these cases it is not necessarily a deferral which leads to something pleasurable within the film, but to the pleasurable—sometimes joyful—experience of the end of the film.

**IT** has been suggested that Canadian and Quebecois films do not "suture" in the same way that American cinema "sutures." What this argument appears to express, in simpler language, is that the conventions of eyeline-matching shots, shot-reverse shots, and point-of-view-shots, do not form part of as rigorous a code or convention in the former cinemas as in the latter. Except in the sense popularized by William Rothman,<sup>3</sup> suture is not reducible to these conventions of editing. Once the concept of suture is returned to something of its psychoanalytical meaning, it is possible to refute the suggestion that suture is at all absent from the Canadian or Quebecois cinemas. The degree to which these cinemas are both bound up with the difference and deferral of representation makes them particularly good examples of suture in the sense of Miller and Lacan rather than in the—finally inaccurate—sense of Rothman.

Suture, it is argued, "names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse."<sup>4</sup> Heath notes that Oudart's development of the idea of suture depends on an analogy between cinema





**Wavelength** (Michael Snow, 1967).

and the mirror-phase, an analogy Heath contests because the cinematic spectator has "already accomplished" the mirror-phase, is "always already in reading."<sup>5</sup> It is, however, from Oudart that the notion of suture in cinematic discourse becomes bound up with the problem of loss or incompleteness. For Oudart, suture is "involved with the 'tragic and vacillating nature of the image'.<sup>6</sup> The discursive nature of cinema, following Oudart, "is seen as implicated in loss, the loss of the totality of the image."<sup>7</sup> To think of cinema as discourse, as the production of a particular address to the spectator-subject, is to recognize this loss of the totality of the image—the loss of an imaginary unity—as the inevitable relationship of the subject to discourse in general, not simply to visual or iconic discourse. Heath puts it this way:

The realization of cinema as discourse is the production at every moment of the film of a subject address, the specification of the play of incompleteness-completion. What suture can serve to name is this specification, variously articulated but

always a function of representation (the play for a subject, its taking place).<sup>8</sup>

So arguably it is not that these films do not suture, but that they do not suture in the way of the system used by Hollywood.<sup>9</sup>

**EXPERIMENTAL** cinema is a case in point. Experimental cinema immediately poses the problem of the role and position of the spectator vis-à-vis the artefact: how do I respond to these films, how do I make sense of them, what do they mean to me? In the absence of recognizable codes, in the absence of a familiar and transparent style, or form, or mode, the spectator is thrown back on his or her own devices. But at the same time, there is the problem of the spectator as subject: insofar as the codes of (even) experimental cinema are both determined and determining, it becomes possible to think of the spectator of experimental cinema not merely as an individual creatively participating in the production of meaning, but also of the way in which the very same spectator is being produced

by these textual practices. Heath suggests that the nature of representation is the production of images *for* the spectator, and the production of the spectator-as-subject in relation to those images. This is precisely the function of suture.

The bind of representation, the representing, is its completion of address, exactly the effecting and effect of the "for me," the "mine," position as possession.<sup>10</sup>

But the dilemma of certain experimental films is the degree to which this relationship of position and possession is thrown into disorder, the degree to which the address is not complete. Films such as Rimmer's *Surfacing on the Thames*, Gallagher's *Seeing in the Rain* (1981), Epp's *Trapline* (1976), Wieland's *Dripping Water* and especially Snow's *Wavelength* seem not to contest fundamentally Heath's argument that a film "is the production of a past for the subject, the spectator bound in time with the film, to the meanings it proposes, constructs to make sense of time"<sup>11</sup>—though in order to retain the specificity of the experience of a certain practice of



Canadian experimental filmmaking it would certainly need to be shown how the "meanings" proposed and constructed by these films and their spectators differ from those proposed and constructed by other cinemas.

**BUT** let us look specifically at Gruben's *Sifted Evidence* (1981) and Elder's *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* (1979). What happens to the *für mich*, the "for me" of these films? Indeed, what happens to *subjectivity* in these films which seem to me, at least, to be very much "about" the problem of the subject? Problem of subjectivity and problem of gender: *Sifted Evidence* and *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* share these basic concerns. It is perhaps understandable that, as a schematic inroad into the films, one would wish to emphasize the differences between them, differences which could be mapped onto a grid of binary oppositions in which the dyads nature/culture, earth goddess/Christian god, matriarchy/patriarchy, feminine language/patriarchal language, being-the-phallus/having-the-phallus, would all find their inevitable places. Understandable, that is, because so much contemporary feminist theory argues for (untenable?) ideals such as a "feminine" language capable of articulating "feminine desire," whatever that may be discovered to mean. And understandable because this "feminine desire" is considered to be the underside of a "male" desire based upon mastery through *logos*, through Reason-as-Speech. Certainly *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* offers us an omnipresent narrating voice, but

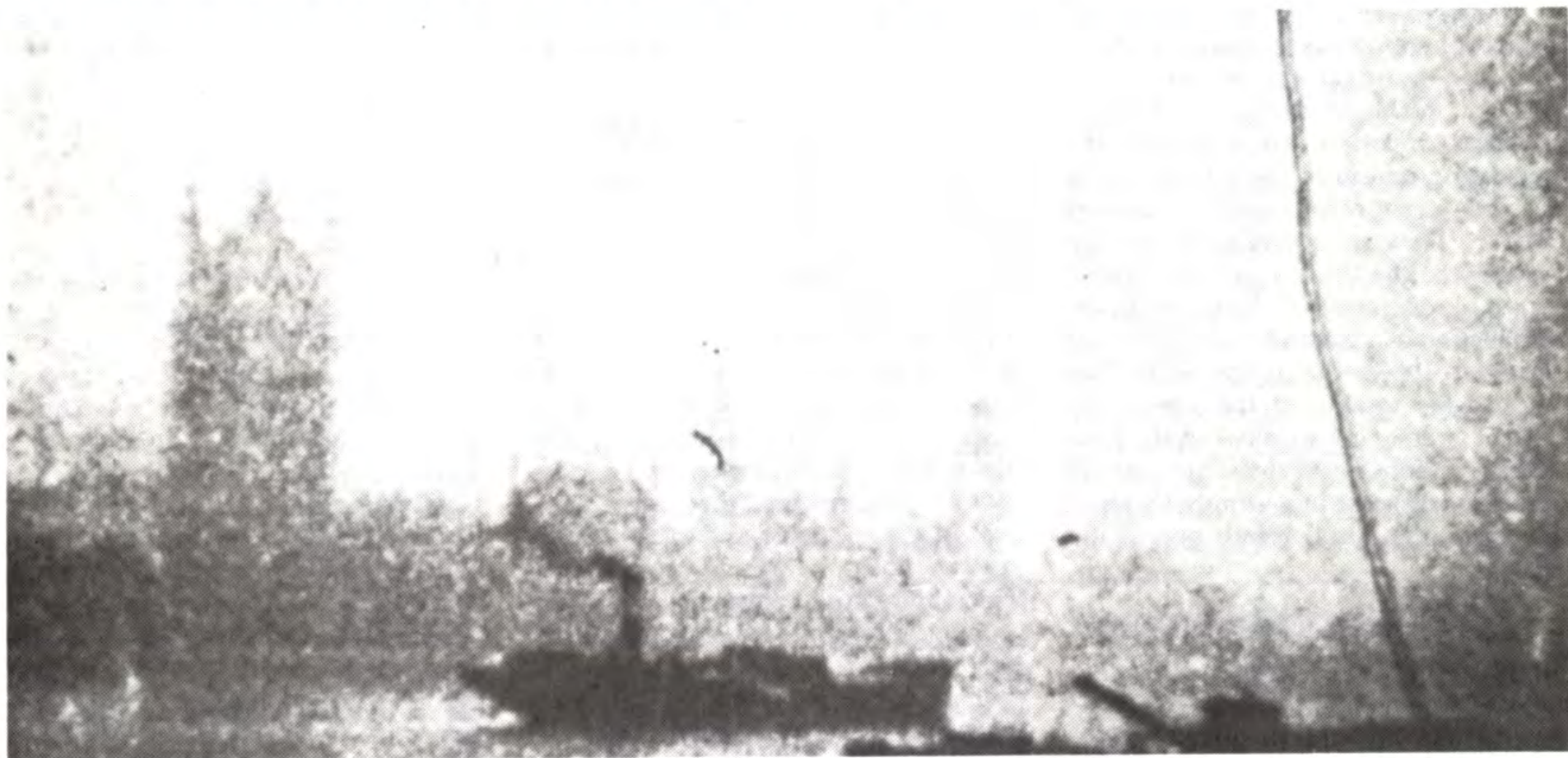
then so too does *Sifted Evidence*.

Arguably, the relationship between narration and action in these films fails to confirm the simple relation of mastery and domination usually assumed to be characteristic of voice-of-God narrations. Logocentricity appears to be as much at risk in Elder as in Gruben. Though the question of language can be clearly aligned with the question of gender in each film (and it would be unhelpful to minimize this distinction), the gender-specificity of the two films might be seen as particular reactions/responses to a common problem: the problem of the relationship between language and experience. If Gruben's *Sifted Evidence* suggests the difficulty of woman's articulation of "experience," a difficulty seen also in *Central Character*, Elder's *Worldly Wisdom* unexpectedly addresses the same difficulty of articulation of "experience," though this time of a particularly male "experience". For the spectator, then, *The Central Character* (1977) and *Worldly Wisdom* confront the failure of imaginary unity, the failure of identity between position and possession of the subject-address, of representation as "for me." In a certain sense, the extended duration of, say *Surfacing on the Thames* or *Dripping Water* reinforces the association of possession of the image and the spectator's position. Elder and Gruben, by fracturing their representations, by offering multiple voices and/or points of view, by foregrounding the construction of their films as well as the reflection which informed the films in the first place, mark the fragility of the experience of

suture, which is also, of course, the fragility of the experience of the subject in representation.

**FEMINIST** filmmaking shares with experimental filmmaking the investigation of narrative structure and subjectivity. As well, however, it questions our tendency to assume that the cinematic image is a simple representation of some previously given "real" situation. Gruben's *Central Character* and *Sifted Evidence*, by their elaborate and preeminently visible manipulation of the codes of straightforward iconic representation cannot begin to allow the spectator to believe that "this is the way it was." In *Sifted Evidence*, we are advised that this is a restaging, a re-enactment, but because of the mediated nature of the re-enactment there is no necessary proof that what is represented was ever simply "the way it was." The restaging permits reflection upon the influence of gender difference on the course of represented actions or events in the film, but is not authorized by reference to some previously given "real." On the contrary, it is the very process of reflection which authorizes the representation of these events in the form of a re-enactment. Neither *Central Character* nor *Sifted Evidence* can be mistaken for "documentary," that is, for films which could be understood as in some sense "capturing" some "real" empirically observable "natural" event. The cinematic image is not grounded in nature, but in history, convention, reflection.

Neither is Dansereau's *La Vie rêvée* authorized by reference to something



**Surfacing on the Thames** (David Rimmer, 1970).



given independently of the narrative organization of the film. Clearly the desire to represent dream, imagination and fantasy stems from the acknowledgement that, traditionally and conventionally, dominant cinematic practices which value only the empirically observable and the logically understandable have failed to represent these subjective psychological states. The documentary tradition, which might be said to manifest the desire for control of the object (the objective or social world) through manipulation, technique or calculation, fails completely to know how to represent the subjective. Similarly, and this is the sort of point argued by feminist theorists concerned with the "enigma" of female desire (Freud's question of questions: "Was will das Weib?"), there has not been developed in our culture a means of articulating the relationship between woman's desire and representation. Clearly any attempt in this direction cannot perpetuate a mode of representation which suggests at whatever level that representation is simply the mimetic reinscription of what can be observed "out there," in the world. The dream and fantasy sequences in *La Vie rêvée* must be thought subjectively rather than objectively; indeed, they must be thought *discursively*. There are epistemological problems in this line of feminist argument which should not detain us here. By breaking with linear-causal narrative development and by focussing attention on the objectification of the representation of women (an objectification which I would argue the film also repeats) *La Vie rêvée* foregrounds its construction as image, as representation, as well as the question of woman's relationship to representation. This is a self-reflexive representational practice, like Gruben's.

**IF**, as Heath suggests, representation is the binding of a subject and a discourse, the construction through time of a past for the subject, then it becomes necessary to inquire into the problem of narrative in relation to Canadian and Quebecois cinema. Specifically, it is necessary to confront the question of what happens to film when it is no longer organized around the familiar codes of story and plot. For despite the unpleasure which must be experienced in any hair-splitting discussion of critical terminology, I want to suggest that even in the most minimalist forms of experimental cinema (we might think of *Wavelength* and *Dripping Water* here), while clearly, "story" and "plot" are virtually absent, it is not clear that there



TOP — **Les Maudit Sauvages** (Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, 1971). CENTRE — **The Art of Worldly Wisdom** (R. Bruce Elder, 1979). BOTTOM — **City of Gold** (Koenig and Kroiter, 1957).





is an absence of narrative. Admittedly, thanks principally to the appropriation of the language of literary criticism by film studies, "narrative" has come to mean something on the order of the logical, chronological or dialectical development of specifically meaningful actions in a fiction. Webster's offers as a definition of narrative that which "has the form of a story." Against this dominant conception of narrative I wish to point to the work of Paul Ricoeur who notes the reciprocal relationship between narrativity and temporality.<sup>12</sup> Narrative might, then, be understood as the temporal involvement of the subject in discourse or representation. We could then discuss the difference of narrativization between, say, *Laura* (object of Heath's analysis in "Narrative Space") and *Wavelength* or *La Tendresse ordinaire* (Leduc 1973). That is, we could distinguish between narrativization in films which attempt to catch the spectator up in a rigorous emplotting, and those which allow the spectator to maintain some sort of distance to the ideological hold which is most effective in "classic" fiction features. The narrative difference might be the effect the organization of specific "ideological holds" on the spectator, rather than the presence or absence of a series of meaningfully related and accessible plot actions. More accurately, the presence of a series of meaningfully related and accessible plot actions could be seen as essentially ideological rather than as essentially narrative. For if narrative involves the experience of time and desire, then, as I have attempted to suggest, these experiences are as much available in *Surfacing on the Thames* or *L'Hiver bleu* as in the films of Sirk or Renoir or Ford.

**THE** narrative strategies of what Peter Harcourt has called *L'Ecole Cinak* combine the desire for the there-then and the desire for the here-now: the contradictory desires for some sort of authentic or self-evident presentation of the iconic image (cinematic image as "This is how it was") with the development of long takes and sequences which have extended temporal duration though seldom much "plot action." In an attempt to find a descriptive language with which to discuss what characterizes the Cinak style, it is clearly tempting to borrow terms like "minimalist," "structuralist," and even "materialist," from various recent avant-garde movements. The problem with this terminological borrowing is that what was originally meant by

phrases like structuralist-materialist gets lost as the term is reapplied in a different context or to a different filmic practice. The structuralist-materialist avant-garde is a cinema of semiotic reduction, an absolutist cinematic practice dedicated to the (supposed) ontological purity of film. This certainly does not describe the Cinak school. If we substitute the term "semantic" for the term "semiotic" because the latter is too bound up with the dichotomies of Saussurean linguistics, with the simple distinctions or oppositions between signifiers and signifieds, it can be argued that while the structuralist-materialist avant-garde is clearly interested in semantic reduction (ontological purity becoming a tautology on the order of "this is this"), the Cinak school is interested in semantic expansion.

The delight with which Cinak films represent small actions—driving on a highway, looking at a Cézanne, celebrating an anniversary—reinvests these moments with a centrality and meaningfulness they are rarely granted in the cinema. If narrative films are conventionally interested in the advancement of dramatic action, Cinak on the contrary invites a leisurely thinking through of the non-dramatic, of the "everyday." "Action," for the films of the Cinak school, is understood in the sense of human activity rather than in the sense of plot device. Cinak, finally, is not at all structuralist-materialist. It follows one trajectory of the postmodern, the trajectory toward reintegration, away from modernist fragmentation. Cinak films are reconstructive rather than deconstructive. This might explain why there does not appear to be a clearly articulated ideological or political aspect to much of the Cinak work, unlike, for example, the political and ideological reflections of recent feminist filmmaking. An argument could possibly be developed concerning the strike sequences in *L'Hiver bleu*, but the counterargument would be that, like so many of the other episodes in the film, the strike is just one more thing that is going on in that community. The spectator-critic can argue whether its inclusion is or is not essentially political. Political and ideological readings can always be mapped onto artifacts; it is less frequent that the artifacts announce their political or ideological positions.

How can a descriptive critical language begin to articulate the specificity of Cinak films? One approach is to contrast them with so-called "classical" Hollywood cinema in terms of narrative and spectator engagement. Unlike Hol-

lywood emplotting strategies, it is frequently difficult to foresee how various Cinak films will develop: the question, "What is going to happen next?", so characteristic of spectatorial engagement in the dramatic action of Hollywood cinema, is seldom a significant one in relation the Cinak films. On the contrary, the question to be asked by the spectator is more frequently, "What is going on now?" Cinak films focus the spectator's attention on the present. Hollywood cinema is teleological: the spectator, habituated to recognizing the inevitable trajectory of the plot toward some climax or resolution of tensions, experiences the film through the testing of his or her expectations concerning the narrative development(s). As Iser argues,<sup>13</sup> such "readings" are based on the twin processes of anticipation and retrospection. Which is to say that traditional Hollywood narratives are guaranteed, as it were from the outside, by the teleology which allows spectators to know that the film is going somewhere for a reason, that the narrative developments are a means to the more general end of narrative resolution. To apply the means/ends hypothesis to the films of the Cinak school, I would suggest that, contrary to Hollywood practice, what the spectator experiences scene by scene is often an end in itself. Rather than being controlled by some teleology of narrative development or escalation of dramatic tension, the Cinak films reinvest the spectator's interest and pleasure in the ongoing filmic present. Means/ends distinctions are seldom absolute, and clearly some Cinak films are more "developmental" than others. Nonetheless I would argue that on the whole the Cinak films have to do with narrative as the binding of the spectator in time to the filmic discourse, rather than with strategies of emplotment and the teleologies of dramatic action.

Reconstructiveness and semantic expansion are related to each other through two central "techniques" used by the Cinak school: the long take (or sequence) and the (medium or) long shot. These techniques have been theorized most recently in relation to feminist film practice, especially that of Chantal Ackerman. The use of long takes or sequences attempts to rediscover "real time," a non-dramatic time which is meant to suggest that filmic actions occur in their "real" pro-filmic temporal duration. Preparing the cake batter in *La Tendresse ordinaire* is one example. Though there is a certain amount of cutting, this sequence devel-



ops quite independently of any sense of urgent dramatic action, and indeed apart from any sense that the end or resolution of the film is dependent upon the activity or its completion. There is of course an ontological aspect to this desire for "real time," but one which is quite different from the "ontological purity" of the structuralist-material avant-garde. The use of long takes or sequences allows for reflection upon the semantic value, and significance, of these non-dramatic, "real-time" actions. Combining long takes with long shots allows the entire screen image to take on a significance which the Hollywood practices of close-up and shot/reverse-shot cannot permit.

This returns us to the question of spatial extension and temporal duration. I have suggested that land-, city- and snowscapes are of particular importance to Canadian and Quebec films. This is certainly clear in the films of the Cinak school. However, and simultaneously, interior shots are often invested with as much aesthetic significance as exteriors. This is abundantly clear in, for example, *La Tendresse ordinaire* and *Le Vieux pays*. All interiors in *Le Vieux pays* convey meaning, but what is more, the extended examination of them is (or quickly becomes) pleasurable. As the establishing sequence in Abel's Parisian hotel room makes clear, there is little that is arbitrary in the composition of Lefebvre's shots. The relationship between character and immediate environment is of central importance to the semantic value of the film. Similarly, in *La Tendresse ordinaire*, the sequences which develop inside the house—especially those sequences in which the camera slowly examines the various rooms of the house—produce an interest and pleasure which is largely unrelated to questions of plot, character motivation or action. And the temporal duration of these shots and sequences, which allows for the spectator's reflection and aesthetic pleasure, is an essential component in the experience of the semantic value of those represented spaces, whether interiors or exteriors. Time is necessary for the experience of the meaning of space. And, in a certain way, the film of the Cinak school overturn time into space, duration into extension, emplotment into narrative, *énoncé* into *énonciation*, which is to say, into discourse.

**I HAVE** suggested that the Canadian and Quebecois cinemas are marked by the recognition of incompleteness. I mentioned their inability to combine a

complete temporal duration with a complete spatial extension, and attempted to identify certain characteristics of these cinemas by contrasting them with so-called dominant Hollywood practice. In "Narrative Space," Heath argues that the "ideological hold" of Hollywood cinema is achieved by the combination of certain conventions of emplotment, focussing on the "containment" of characters' actions in strict relation to the teleological development of dramatic action. These strategies of "containment" function, ideologically, to deny the incompleteness of cinematic representation, the problem of the absence which the filmic image makes present, the problem of the "outsides" which threaten the coherence of narrative space. There is an aspect of the style of the Cinak school which, in a very much different way, also seeks to overcome "the loss of the totality of the image." This can be seen in a reconstructive cinematic practice based on the long shot and the long take. The desire for a reconstructive cinema is a desire for a return to presence, for a return to a full aesthetic experience and pleasure. Again, in Barthes' suggestive phrases, reconstruction marks the desire to reintegrate the "there-then" of the film and the "here-now" of the spectatorial experience, not in terms of a simplistic "suspension of disbelief" but in a complete reflective or contemplative experience. It is the very effectiveness of this moment-by-moment reintegration in films like *Le Vieux pays* or *L'Hiver bleu* which puts in place the conditions of what I have called exquisite nostalgia: the experience of the "tragic and vacillating nature" of cinematic representation. In the films of L'Ecole Cinak, exquisite nostalgia names the experience of the moment-by-moment loss of the image, the impossibility of its completeness. Despite the tendency of Cinak films to be episodic, to work with tab-

leaux, to imitate the formal properties and organization of paintings (as the numerous Cézanne quotations in *Le Vieux pays* suggest), despite their spatialization, Cinak films—like the other films we have considered—are about the loss of the image in time. The more complete the illusion of "real time" and "real space," the more moving is the loss of the image, the experience of that loss. □

## ENDNOTES

1. Roland Barthes. "The Rhetoric of the Image," *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath. Glasgow: Fontana, 1977, pp. 32-51.
2. Barthes, pp. 44-45.
3. William Rothman. "Against 'The System of the Suture,'" *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, pp. 451-459.
4. Jacques-Alain Miller, quoted in Stephen Heath. "Notes on Suture," *Screen*, Volume 18, No. 4 (Winter 1977-78), p. 55. Miller continues: "We shall see that it figures there as the element which is lacking, in the form of a stand-in. For, while there lacking, it is not purely and simply absent. Suture, by extension—the general relation of lack to the structure of which it is an element, inasmuch as it implies the position of, a taking-the-place-of [*tenant-lieu*]."
5. Heath, p. 60.
6. Heath, p. 59.
7. Heath, p. 59.
8. Heath, pp. 63-64.
9. Heath, p. 69.
10. Stephen Heath, "Difference," *Screen*, Volume 19, No. 3 (Autumn 1978), p. 108.
11. "Difference," p. 108.
12. Paul Ricoeur. "Narrative Time," *On Narrative*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981.
13. Wolfgang Iser. *The Implied Reader*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974.

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# ***Meshes of the Afternoon:*** HOLLYWOOD, THE AVANT-GARDE AND PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

by Julian Wolfreys

**M**AYA DEREN'S FIRST FILM, *MESHERS OF THE Afternoon* (1943), can be engaged in two distinct, yet interrelated (meshing) areas. The first area is that of interpretation and the problems encountered—the ensnaring difficulties—by traditional reading activities in *their* engagement with the text. In foregrounding what has been a relatively unexplored area of *Meshes*, that is its problematic modes of signification, I shall be arguing against delimiting readings which treat the film merely as a “puzzle” (both Deren’s own word, in her “Letter to James Card,”<sup>1</sup> and the Oedipal quest of reading practices aiming for textual closure). At the same time, I shall be drawing on Deren’s own theoretical writings in order to provide a *caveat* against readings which are seemingly structured around another form of exegetical totalization, that of authorial intentionality. As I shall show, there are irreconcilable contradictions and tensions between *theoria* and *praxis*. These create a dialectical strain forcing open lacunae—meshes of the mesh—into which the anti-interpretive analyst can insert him/herself.

Such an intervention will take place in the second area of this analysis, that of the film’s site of production. Here I will be examining the relationship of *Meshes* to its discursive, historical ~~text~~ contexts and looking at how the text intersects culturally through certain pro-filmic signifiers and technical

aspects with the “Hollywood” system.<sup>2</sup> I will be arguing that the construction of the text is entangled with codes and signifying systems which are recognisable as belonging to dominant cinematic practices. By their insertion into the avant-garde, these recognisable codes are used to establish what is potentially a dialectical process in the diegesis of the film-text, a dialectic between Hollywood mainstream and the avant-garde, and between text and viewer.

The dialectic structure is problematic; it confounds interpretation and makes difficult clear-cut decisions on the part of feminist film analysis (the political area of intervention from which this paper is generated) as to whether Deren’s film-texts either collude with patriarchal practices or constitute a feminist activity. Thus, for the purposes of this argument, the dialectic of *Meshes* can be approached if the text is engaged with from a position of modernist literary poetics. My reason for such a frame of reference is not merely to appropriate a particular discourse from literary studies in order to recuperate *Meshes* into certain aesthetic traditions. As Colin MacCabe makes clear in *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, the strategies of modernism are not merely aesthetic but have political and ideological importance for all forms of discourse on a revolutionary scale.<sup>3</sup> The relationship between *Meshes* and mainstream Hollywood cinema of the 1940s and ’50s is somewhat analagous to the relationship between the texts of Joyce, Eliot *et al* and the Classic Realist Text of the 19th



century. The discourses of Deren's film are drawn from a dominant tradition that they seek to break away from, as were the discourses of the earlier literary modernists (*their* texts being the product of another historical avant-garde).

Clearly, the question with *Meshes* is always one of *ways of (non-)reading*. Despite its overt display of "Freudian icons,"<sup>4</sup> which virtually beg that *Meshes of the Afternoon* be read in psychoanalytic terms, there exists for the viewer of the text a transgressive semiosis and unfixedness of conventional signification (though still comprehensible as signifiers belonging to a conventional practice), which mark the film-text as a product of the avant-garde. Feminist film theorists, drawing on the discourses of psychoanalysis, might be tempted to limit their reading of the text to an interpretation of certain of these images and "visual metaphors." Such an exegetical activity would, however, hierarchize the filmic discourses and thus redefine its own manoeuvres in terms of a typically humanist (patriarchal) reading process. One of the problems of psychoanalytic interpretation is that it would tend to ignore historic and cultural referents while focusing on a limited chain of signifiers in order to assert the primacy of the phallus as the originary and central motivator of the diegesis and transcendental signified.

Another problematic area of the text with regard to reading practices is its ending. Even the most rigorous anti-interpretive critic might be swayed by Maya Deren's pronouncement of closure in the "Letter to James Card," where she states that *Meshes* is a film concerned with suicide.<sup>5</sup> However, as P. Adams Sitney pertinently points out, such a meaning is suspended; the reality of the suicide remains ambiguous.<sup>6</sup> The point here is that, given the contradictions between the written word and the filmic text which become so clearly mapped as discursive lacunae, analysts should be wary of statements—especially those of the author and their own—which attempt to fill the gaps. Such an activity is unambiguously Oedipal and counter to feminist politics of reading.

The presence of gaps, or rather the presence of absence—"mesh"—can mean both the network or the holes between the string—points to the play of textual *différance*, the places, following Derrida, where signification is signification because it differs from other moments of semiosis and because any signifier is always and only a deferral of all other signifiers. It is this play, this game of deferral, that *Meshes* partakes of; and it is this possibly infinite dissemination of the sign that refuses the construction of a filmic meta-language and should thus warn the critic against analysis. Some feminist theorists might be wary of the lack of a meta-language, because the film-text might not address women in any positive way; ambiguity can be more positive, however, than the focus of a specific (implicitly monolithic) discourse.

The example of the multiple imaging of Maya Deren in *Meshes of the Afternoon* is interesting for the ambiguity it provides when discussed under the *aegis* of the feminist debate around the filmic exploitation of the specular female and the discursive desocialization of women concomitant with such an objectifying strategy. The multiplicity of Mayas simultaneously projected on the screen is a performance of the modernist fragmentation and pluralization of subjectivity, identity; there is performed also the denial of unitary consciousness which it has been the project of both filmic and literary realism to promote. In *Meshes* the multiple female figure is not the classical objectification of women, but belongs instead to what is potentially a feminist poetics—and politics—of refusal. And that refusal is bound up with the refusal to present the illusion of presence (presence for someone) or to construct, in the words of Jonathan Dollimore, a "telos of harmonic integration."<sup>7</sup>

There is another shot in *Meshes* that marks the intersection between feminist film theory, the manipulations of the female image by an avant-garde modality, and the question of the (im)possibility of interpretation (these meshes—of the film-text and my own analytic discourse—can be seen to be growing into an ever more entangled web of discourses; such is the refusal of the film to accede to any particular set of "truths"). The image in question is that of Deren's shadow, early in the film.

The shadow, anatomically clearly that of a woman, is projected onto a wall. Feminist film theorists might argue that such an image defines women exclusively by sexual difference. However, the shadow posits a dubious specularity offering, to invoke Derridean discourse, an ambiguous double writing—and therefore a double reading—of the female image. *Différance* comes into play once again in the comprehension of the signifying process. The shadow is itself a signifier of the female and not the woman (nor her image) at all. That which is signified is deferred, placed *in absentia* by the signifying practice of cinema. The image of the shadow self-consciously foregrounds the nature of filmic projection whereby an image on celluloid—filmic inscription—is presented as the phenomenological other that is absent, and signified as absent by the presence of the trace. Thus the shadow's shadow takes on the status of the *mise en abyme*, the "placement in abyss" where the process of textuality is represented *within* the text as a purely textual signifier. The image of the shadow is presented as projection in the projected text, with the wall being the screen. In the words of Jacques Derrida, "Il y va d'un débordement de la signature."<sup>8</sup> The self-reflexivity of signification precludes translation/interpretation through its own ineluctable plenitude. The shadow sign is the signature of a signature, a pure mirror-stage signifier in a realm of potentially infinite semiosis placing semantic value in suspension. The shadow is only the shadow of a woman by virtue of the fact that the viewing subject is constructed by the Hollywood context of other filmic codes to re-cognize—re-vision, bring back to the mind's I—a certain absent specularity (how can specularity be constituted in absence, when it is specifically a signifying system for the promotion of the illusion of presence?). What the projection should remind us of is *its own construct as projection*. Beyond and before the illusion of reality, an objectified fetishized female "reality" constructed for the God-like eye/I of the male subject through the tricks of perspective, the image of the shadow in *Meshes* plays with the meaning it refuses to assign. Spatial and temporal referents are closed down as the *mise en abyme* forestalls *mise en scène*; shadow-or the image of a shadow—on a wall inside light and shadow on the screen. "Inside" cannot exist, neither can "outside," merely pure filmic projection, endless textuality which itself places *sous rature* the codes of the reference it employs, *at the very moment that it employs them*.

Thus we have a moment of overflowing signification that is irreplaceable by any conventional exegetical process. Such an excessive inscription might be mistaken, Derrida wryly hints, as "style," the arch-referent of *authorial trace*.<sup>9</sup> Deren's writings show that such a trace is clearly not intentional, nor should it be mistaken as such.

In her article, "The Point of Self-Expression in Avant-Garde Film," Pam Cook suggests that avant-garde film making is essentially a vehicle for individual self-expression.<sup>10</sup> She qualifies her initial idealist statement by historically locating this "Romantic" vision of personal film production as part of "New American Cinema after the Second World War."<sup>11</sup> Although made in 1943 (before the period cited by Cook), *Meshes of the Afternoon* is a text belonging to the mode of



individual expression. Deren's first film was *Meshes*, and she continued to produce films throughout the period described by Cook. Concomitant with this is Deren's output of theoretical writings. I mention this in relation to Cook's article because there are moments in Deren's writings which prefigure Cook's own analysis. From what I have stated it may be inferred that there is a certain similarity and unity between the written and filmic texts of Maya Deren. This however is not the case. Rather, there is a marked dissimilarity—a gap—between texts, and this is rendered visible by Deren's attempts in writing to project her somewhat self-conscious image of the individual artist while at the same time prohibiting the possible plurality of meanings that the film-texts appear to keep in play.

In the opening pages of "Cinema as an Art Form," Deren develops what might be considered a polemic against the Hollywood factory. In pseudo-Marxist terms, she writes of the "monstrous division of labour" and the making of an "assembly line product."<sup>12</sup> Her own position is far less radical than might be first thought:

Intrinsic integrity is possible only when the individual who conceives the work remains its prime mover until the end.<sup>13</sup>

What appears at first to be a materialist argument is quickly mediated against by this presentation of the Romantic—and also, by its implications of unity and originary source, phallogocentric—artist in isolation, in control of the art form. Many other criticisms can be leveled at Deren's writings, not least the deification of the artist pointed to above, nor the esoteric vagueness of discourse made apparent by the choice of words and terms such as "creative" and "experience,"<sup>14</sup> "necessary pulse" and "meaningfully."<sup>15</sup> Although there is not enough space here to discuss all of the problems in depth, I will point to major sites of trouble in the texts.

There are two fundamental problems with the written texts, and these problems certainly arise for feminist analysts in their attempt to recuperate "Maya Deren" for political purposes. Firstly, Deren writes of the camera's "indiscriminate" or "absolute fidelity," and the presentation by the camera of the "innocent arrogance of an objective fact."<sup>16</sup> In what appears to be an almost Barthesian "Death of the Author" gesture—"this exclusion of the artist"—there is inscribed in the text itself a counter-argument to the notion of the Romantic author/artist based on the apparent objectivity of filmic representation, the image being caught "as it is." What this, of course, does not take into account is the "fact" that *the camera is always positioned by someone*. A point of view, controlled by the operator of the camera, is what the viewing subject is being presented with. Given the degree to which artifice is deystified and subsequently foregrounded in *Meshes*—the shots of the four footsteps or the multiple Mayas provide obvious examples—the subject cannot but help be archly aware of directorial/editorial intervention. Secondly, along with the individualist tendencies that are expressed elsewhere, there is inscribed a longing for the enunciation of "truth" through the medium of film; Deren refers to film as though it were a picture puzzle "where, if you draw a continuous line . . . you end up with a picture."<sup>17</sup> Here is an argument for closure in film practice that is impossible in *Meshes*, as has been demonstrated.

Thus Deren's film practice is seen to be at odds with her theorizing. Using her own title against her, I turn again to the term "mesh/es." Deren's writing attempts to bring together certain gears or cogs (figuratively speaking or, rather, writing, so as not to falsely privilege the logocentric mode) in an effort to close up, to mesh, the inscriptions of the pen with those of the camera. Such a tension of wheel against wheel

soon forces them to move apart (as with any gear system, always based on *differential*), exposing the gaps in the network. Clearly, it is this engaging system which entangles the interpretive viewer. Yet at the same time, textual force arrests meaningful flow while foregrounding an intertextual/semiotic/ideological flow. Given that this is the case, it would be a more valuable task to examine *Meshes* with regard to the codes from which it is constructed. I will turn now to an explanation of the text in relation to certain cultural and historical operations.

There are particular codes in *Meshes of the Afternoon* that bear striking resemblances to codes belonging to dominant cinematic practices. Similarly, there are also noticeable the signifying systems of what can be construed as an avant-garde modality. It is this cultural intersection that is fruitful for analytical intervention. *Meshes* engages in a ceaseless historical and discursive activity which determines that the text be encountered, not as a finished, hermetic product, but as the dialectic process I have already written of. The front on which the dialectic is fought can be mapped out as a space between ideology (Hollywood) and textuality (the avant-garde). Textuality seeks constantly to arrest violently and displace the dominant modes of cinematic signification. To turn back to an earlier discussion as an illustration of the arresting process, the image of the shadow demonstrates how incorrect is the "philosophy of presence"<sup>18</sup> of mainstream cinematic practice in the 1940s. The avant-garde textual mode wrests an anatomical signifier—the ephemera of the signifier constructed from difference in light and dark—from dominant codes. It is in this appropriation of codes that *Meshes* reveals, to quote Terry Eagleton, a particular "ideological ~~con~~juncture . . . the complex interplay of determinants in any historical context" (my erasures).<sup>19</sup>

Another site of ~~con~~juncture in Deren's text is in the application and reworking of the codes of a particular Hollywood genre, roughly contemporaneous with Deren's own film activities, *film noir*.<sup>20</sup> *Meshes* employs high-key lighting and chiaroscuro effects, oblique camera angles, repetition and enigma (through technical intervention with temporality), and the synecdochic dispersal of the female body. There would again appear to be moments, therefore, of simultaneous collusion with and a departure from (a departure due to the textual privileging of a "phantasy" paradigm rather than one that is realist) specific signifying systems.

However, *Meshes* does foreground process and so upsets certain stabilities—for example, a unified subject position—produced by the classic text. In doing so, the avant-garde text assumes qualities and strategies of structural/materialist avant-garde film qualities and strategies defined by Stephen Heath in his essay "Repetition Time."<sup>21</sup> Process and construction are reflexively foregrounded throughout the text; the four footsteps and other repeated actions provide direct examples. Such foregrounding frequently has a specific relationship with temporality. Temporal movement is displayed as a method of film signification, rather than being merely clear, all film works with time: "narrative cinema classically depends upon the systematic exploitation of a multiplicity of times."<sup>22</sup> This is certainly the case with both *film noir* and *Meshes*. However, a noticeable difference between the two texts is the degree to which temporality is either overtly manipulated and exposed as a structuring device, or else is effaced as a transparent, "natural" quality. *Meshes* exploits temporality as does dominant cinema. Yet, in *Meshes*, temporal exploitation is employed to disrupt unity, as moments are re-worked and repeated with variations, all of which serve to unfix the unified subject: "The disunity . . . is, exactly, the spectator."<sup>23</sup> Repetition and fragmentation



refuse the subject's mastery over the film while, in the process of alienation, creating the possibility for *jouissance* through the lack of a fixed perspective. "The spectator," writes Heath, "is produced by the film as subject in process . . . with repetition an intensification of that process, the production of a certain freedom or randomness of energy, of no one memory."<sup>24</sup> The uses of repetition in *Meshes* are potentially liberating. Here it can be seen how the avant-garde text exploits a code—that of repetition—against its mainstream use. Heath states that repetition is used in narrative cinema to maintain or produce subject unity. *Meshes* cannot be understood as working towards this, and thus contextual *différance* provides a potentially feminist gesture; that of the arena of/for *jouissance*.

The use of repetition can be examined further. Its use posits a refusal to reach closure. Whereas in *noir*, the repetitive mode is used to establish "truth," to reveal through a variation of repeated shots a certain hitherto undisclosed "reality," Deren's use of repetition and variation prohibits meaningful activity. Each repeated sequence offers a re-reading of the previous scene(s). This is important because there is suggested a possible plurality, a potentially feminine—if not feminist—modality which is ultimately revoked by the intrusion of the male who finally holds the key—both literally and figuratively—and thereby brings the text to a point of closure.<sup>25</sup>

*Meshes* adopts "ready made positions"<sup>26</sup> from a cultural preconstruction that is 1940s Hollywood and in a self-reflexive expression takes as its setting the site of mainstream film production, Southern California, if not Hollywood itself. Thus the text engages in an effective reconstruction of the "available ideas of film"<sup>27</sup> through a process of appropriation. Just how politically effective this can be for feminist filmmaking is open to debate. There is a sense in which the codes that are reconstructed in the text are so ideologically overdetermined (discursive contexts will always determine certain encodings for the female shadow and the knife) by dominant film that no appropriation can wholly "subvert, attack or deny . . . meaning."<sup>28</sup> That we can recognize certain forms of signification as historically specific points to their ideological enclosure. However, *Meshes* is a valuable text. Through the tensions and spaces it creates between narrative and process, between transparency and reflexivity, the text does reveal, to quote Heath once more, "the historical problem of meaning as subject position."<sup>29</sup> It does this, most importantly, by refusing to accede to that position for the most part, while working with the codes that historically are so vital to the structuring of the traditionally male subject in realist cinema. □

## FOOTNOTES

1. Maya Deren, "Letter to James Card," *Women and Cinema: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977), 230.
2. Following Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), I have put "context" *sous rature*, or under erasure. This practice is taken up by Terry Eagleton for political purposes (*Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, London: Verso-New Left Books, 1981). It is with this political gesture in mind that I adopt the *sous rature* inscription. My reason, briefly, is as follows. It is necessary to retain "context/s" even though the terms are somewhat inaccurate. "Context" is inaccurate because, as both Derrida and Eagleton argue, the binary notion of text/context suggests the type of privileging opposition employed by Western metaphysical systems. As such, it bears the marks of power of bourgeois (patriarchal) hegemony which constructs a world view based on a range of such oppositions (male/female, self/other). Therefore, the privileging economy of the term "context" is incompatible ideologically with a radical

materialist/feminist practice. However, the term is still necessary to a degree because it allows for a frame of reference, hence the inscription of both word and partial deletion. As Derrida, and Eagleton following, announce, the idea of text and context is fallacious. Everything is an endless flow of textuality, mediated by ideology.

3. Colin MacCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (London: Macmillan, 1979). See especially the first two chapters, "Theoretical Preliminaries" and "The End of a Meta-Language: From George Eliot to *Dubliners*," 1-39.
4. P. Adams Sitney, "Introduction," *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: n.p., 1970), 6.
5. Deren, *LJC*, 226.
6. Sitney, "Introduction," 6.
7. Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Brighton, Eng.: Harvester Press, 1984), 63.
8. "There is an overflow of signature." Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge/ Signsponge*, 54.
9. Deffida, *Signéponge/ Signsponge*, 54.
10. Pam Cook, "The Point of Self-Expression in Avant-Garde Film," *Catalogue of British Film Institute Productions 1977-1978* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), n.p.
11. Cook, PSF, n.p.
12. Maya Deren, "Cinema as an Art Form," n.p., n.d., 255.
13. Deren, CAF, 255.
14. Deren, CAF, 255.
15. Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality," *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 69.
16. Deren, CR, 60, 63, 65.
17. Deren, *LJC*, 230.
18. Terry Eagleton, "Text, Ideology, Realism," *Literature and society*, ed. Edward Said (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 149.
19. Eagleton, TIR, 150.
20. *Meshes of the Afternoon* was produced just two years after *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), considered to be the first film noir.
21. Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981). Heath is writing of an avant-garde that is historically later than that of *Meshes*, the largely American avant-garde film enterprise, marked by the films of Brakhage and Gidal. It should not be thought that I am confusing differing historical modalities in drawing on Heath. No historical period is neatly demarcated, and there is a distinct overlap (mesh) between the films of Deren and Brakhage in that both work with the "aesthetic of personal vision" as pointed out by Pam Cook (275). Furthermore, Heath's theorizing is valuable in that it can be used to point to material processes common to both mainstream and avant-garde texts which find a meeting place in *Meshes*.

22. Heath, *Questions*, 166-167.
23. Heath, *Questions*, 167.
24. Heath, *Questions*, 170.
25. A final note on repetition: through its constant re-working of temporal and spatial situations, this mode becomes a highly self-reflexive gesture that foregrounds the practice of film projection, thereby materially commenting on process.
26. Heath, *Questions*, 173.
27. Heath, *Questions*, 173.
28. Heath, *Questions*, 174.
29. Heath, *Questions*, 174.

I should like to thank Marcia Rutzel for her encouragement and advice concerning this article; also, Christina Althoff for introducing me to the films of Maya Deren.



# COUNT ME OUT/IN:

## Post-Apocalyptic Visions in Recent Science Fiction Film



The pre-eminent capitalist commodity blown up good in **Mad Max**.



## by Peter Fitting

When you talk about destruction,  
you know you can count me  
out/in

THE BEATLES, "REVOLUTION"

It's already after the end of the  
world . . .

SUN RA

The avant-garde is always a way of celebrating the death of the bourgeoisie, for its own death still belongs to the bourgeoisie; but further than this the avant-garde cannot go; it cannot conceive the funerary term it expressed as a moment of germination, as the transition from a closed society to an open one; it is impotent by nature to infuse its protest with the hope of a new assent to the world: it wants to die, to say so, and it wants everything to die with it.

ROLAND BARTHES,  
CRITICAL ESSAYS (1972), p. 69

A number of people who don't ordinarily go to SF movies nonetheless saw Verhoeven's *Robocop* this past summer. Here a Dutch director, with no background in SF, consciously attempted to both use and critique some of the forms of popular American film, so that it attracted two rather different audiences. On the one hand, through its mix of humour and violence, it appealed to mass market tastes; at the same time, because of its political framing—particularly through the use of TV spots—it was able to satirically depict a Reaganite near-future—a stance which drew more politically conscious viewers and introduced them to this sub-genre of violence-oriented SF. In the following paper I would like to discuss several recent films from within this tradition which are without the political stance of *Robocop*, but which are nonetheless of interest—James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984), and George Miller's "Mad Max" films (*Mad Max* [1979], *Road Warrior* [1981], *Beyond Thunderdome* [1985]).<sup>1</sup> The pleasure we take from films which are seemingly without aesthetic value or any progressive political content itself poses a contradiction, one whose workings and components will provide the focus of this paper. If the following may be considered a form of analysis of the "social unconscious," an

attempt to "deconceal" the repressed fears and hopes of the popular imagination, it must also be understood as an attempt at understanding the ways society shapes my own desires and perceptions as well. There is no "out there," no impersonal and objective stance from which to observe and comment.

I assume, finally, that any resistance or shock at my taking such films seriously stems not only from their ideological shortcomings—their racism and sexism, for instance—but also from their aesthetic ones—with their vulgar and inelegant brutality, their almost complete disregard for aesthetic qualities or noble themes in exchange for cheap thrills, violence and visual excess.

IN one way, these films might best be compared to so-called "sexploitation" movies, except that here it is not prurience which overlays the original SF premise (eg. *Flesh Gordon*, 1974), but an apparent pandering to the audience's taste for violence. Narrative and generic conventions are used as the vehicle for special moments, like the nudity or couplings in sex-films, which are held together rather than generated by the plot. The organizing principle of such films lies in the frequency and spacing of these moments, rather than in the unfolding and outcome of the narrative. Moreover, in the case of the SF film itself, there are also special moments specific to the genre. Historically, it reached a first peak in the 1950s with the various creature and invasion movies, which were related to the larger social and political climate of the period (the Cold War, the bomb).<sup>2</sup> In addition to these popular hybrids of the SF and horror film, there is a second "ideas" current in SF which is perhaps best illustrated by the long success of the television series *Star Trek* (79 programmes from 1966-1969, and, in re-runs, a regular feature of non-prime time television). With the Clarke-Kubrick collaboration on *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which was also the culmination of the "ideas" SF film, "Special Effects" were to become SF's main attraction. Indeed, *2001*'s special effects are often cited as the source of its unexpected and overwhelming success.<sup>3</sup> Although our ability to be dazzled by special effects has begun to wane (primarily because of their now repetitive character), SF films are today firmly established as money-makers since 1977 and the phenomenal success of *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*; the earlier reservations of the studios have been

replaced by whole-hearted enthusiasm.

This intensification of particular moments could be written just as easily, for instance, through the history of the car chase scene, which is not without some relevance to the "Mad Max" films: from *Bullitt*, to the spectacular chase in Friedkin's *The French Connection* (which subsequent films have continually tried to outdo, as in his own *To Live and Die in LA*), such a study would go on to consider the development of the "car movies" (*Smokey and The Bandit*, or the TV spinoff, *Dukes of Hazard*), "trucker" films (*Convoy*), and again, the overlap into SF (*Death Race, Damnation Alley, Battle Truck*).

WHAT makes the films under study interesting to me is not the moments of violence themselves, but their location in a future in ruins following World War III. This setting is made most explicit in the opening sequences of *Road Warrior* which tell of the final clash of "two great warrior tribes" and the resulting chaos and destruction. *Mad Max*, on the other hand, was set in the context of a worsening energy crisis and the fight for gasoline to power people's cars, but the larger nuclear war/post apocalypse background which interests me here was hardly mentioned.<sup>4</sup> In *Road Warrior* the city is gone and we are in the "Wasteland," where Max plays out a Western scenario: helping a group of decent people besieged by a gang of sadistic bikers. *Beyond Thunderdome* follows Max into two further models of emerging post-holocaust communities (although neither future seems to be the outcome of the escaped settlers in *Road Warrior*): the first, "Bartertown," a social-Darwinistic view of life after the apocalypse in which only the toughest survive; and in the second, a glimpse of a utopian new beginning.

The first future is that of the myth of the origin of the state: the frontier town before the arrival of families, churches, or morality; one based moreover on a pre-money economy, where we see not only the "super-structure" ("Auntie Entity" [Tina Turner] and her cronies, or the various items and services for sale), but also at least an aspect of the "base": the production of methane gas from pig shit. Nor does the pertinence of this economic model stop there, for the film also embodies the geo-political reality of the late 20th century in which the base is increasingly centred in the cheap labour and natural resources of the Third World. This geo-political reference is made explicit through the "embargo," when "Master" turns off





Utopian glimmer in **Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome**.

the power, reminding everyone where political power ultimately lies. In the context of the film, the "embargo" forcefully demonstrates what an exploitative super-structure needs Max for—to control through violence the rebelliousness of the masses, in this case to kill Master's protector ("Blaster"). At the same time the "embargo" also reminds the film's first-world audience of their dependence on the continuing ability of the developed countries to exploit third world energy. Like the "Oil Crisis" of the mid-'70s (and on through the Iranian "hostage crisis" which Reagan exploited to defeat Carter in 1979), the image of Bartertown grinding to a halt resonates far beyond its immediate diegetic function through its indirect evocation of the lines at the gasoline pumps in the early '70s. As in *Road Warrior*, then, there is an over-emphasis on energy and the energy crisis, which, paradoxically, leads to a vision of the future in which there is an excess of available energy at the same time that many of the other features of advanced technological civilization have disappeared. There are few books, no television or household appliances, and little technology apart from that involved in keeping the cars running.

If Bartertown is the future of the attempt to reconstruct technology, the

second future of *Beyond Thunderdome* is that of the no-longer-understood traces of technology. Max is expelled from Bartertown when he refuses to kill Blaster and is abandoned in the desert. There he is rescued by a group of children who live in a pastoral Eden, awaiting the return of the saviour—Max—who will lead them out of the wilderness, back to the wonders of civilization. But as Max tries to tell them, all this has been destroyed. Yet, as the film ends, we see some of the children now living in the abandoned buildings of a great city where they camp like nomads among the ruins of a technology whose meaning and functions will be lost within another generation.

The vision of the collapse of civilization, where people move among the ruins of a technology which they no longer understand, is an important subset of the post-holocaust future in written and film SF, and begins with evocations of the ruins of *other*—i.e. non-terrestrial—collapsed civilizations—most familiar to us in the remains of the civilization of the Krull in the film *Forbidden Planet*; or in the many films and novels which depict Mars as an older dying planet, one on which—by extension—civilization has blossomed and died, as in the SF of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Stanley

Weinbaum from the 1920s and '30s. This thematic current may be juxtaposed to visions of a future Earth where our descendants wander in the rubble, no longer understanding the remnants of technological civilization, from H.G. Wells's *Time Machine* (1895, film version 1960), through Jack Vance's *Dying Earth* (1950) and Russell Hoban's *Ridley Walker* (1980). (This category might also include the "lost civilizations" of A.A. Merritt or H. Rider Haggard, and by extension "Sword and Sorcery" of the Conan type, although such works are increasingly distant from the vision of a lost *technological* civilization which is my starting point.) Images of collapsed terrestrial civilizations are not so popular in film—except as the result of nuclear war—although the ruined Statue of Liberty in *Planet of the Apes* is a striking visual representation of that theme.

Finally, the theme of world destruction and world rebuilding *after* nuclear destruction in a staple of SF writing. (This theme is exhaustively catalogued in Paul Brians' recent *Nuclear Holocausts: atomic war in fiction, 1895-1984*, Kent, Ohio: Kent State UP, 1987.) Films which deal with these themes range from more 'serious' treatments, from *Dr. Strangelove*, *The War Game*, *The Day After*, *On The Beach*, or *Fail-*



*Safe*, through films closer to the mood of *Road Warrior: A Boy and His Dog*, *Panic in the Year Zero*, *No Blade of Grass*, *Damnation Alley*, or *The Ultimate Warrior*, and include some particularly awful Italian "Mad Max" imitations: *Exterminators of the Year 3000*, *The New Barbarians* and *Stryker*.<sup>5</sup>

Turning, now, to *The Terminator*, it is set primarily in the present. A few years into the future, nuclear war has broken out and the "defence network computers" have taken over and decided to exterminate humans. Against overwhelming odds, human resistance to the rebellious machines is nonetheless on the verge of success. In a last ditch attempt to change their imminent defeat into victory, the machines send an android killer into the past to kill the mother of the leader of the resistance as a way of altering their present! In turn, the resistance sends a man back to protect her and to kill the "terminator." This is the background to the film's focus on the terminator and its mission, although we are given glimpses of the future in which the battle still rages, as gigantic war machines fly overhead blasting everything that moves, while a ragged guerilla band of humans fights on.

### I. "Vehicles of Liberation"

Is it still necessary to state that not technology, not technique, not the machine are the engineers of repression, but the presence, in them, of the masters who determine their number, their life span, their power, their place in life, and the need for them? Is it still necessary to repeat that science and technology are the great vehicles of liberation, and that it is only their use and restriction in the repressive society which makes them into vehicles of domination?

HERBERT MARCUSE,  
AN ESSAY ON LIBERATION  
(1969), p. 21

**THE** aspect of these films which raises the ire of many of the critics of popular culture is the large place given to violence. On one level, the question of violence is a sociological or anthropological one: these representations may be designed to produce an effect, although probably not the "incitement to violence" sometimes described by sociologists.<sup>6</sup> Our society is permeated with images, games and rituals of violence, from comic books and TV car-

toons through the sham brutality of wrestling and the ambiguous ferocity of our supposedly non-violent sports, as well as the increasing bloodiness and gore of contemporary cinema and television. Arguments which attempt to blame the omnipresent spectacles and representations of violence for an increasing level of violence in "reality" do little to explain either the causes of social violence or the fascination with its repeated representation. To the contrary, it seems more reasonable to see these representations as symptoms of something else, and I am particularly interested in explanations of this "imaginary" violence which see it as an attempt to "manage" socially produced angers and frustrations, although sometimes such displaced imaginary resolutions are—in terms of the status quo—unsuccessful, and that rage and frustration erupt into the real.<sup>7</sup>

**MUCH** popular art serves to maintain the status quo by stimulating our repressed hopes and fears, and then, rather than permitting those awakened feelings to become knowledge or praxis, it sets out to defuse this nascent recognition of social contradiction by redirecting and draining off those threatening emotions. These representations of violence provide only an incomplete satisfaction for the anger and frustration we feel when confronted with a world of plenty in which science and technology and the fruits of human labour are

squandered in the intensifying race for new forms of destruction.

In the "Mad Max" films, that rage is fixed on the automobile itself. For the automobile embodies many of the basic contradictions of contemporary capitalism. Automobile production is the essential industry of the most developed capitalist countries. It was here that the techniques of the advanced capitalist mode of production—the assembly line—were developed and perfected. When it became a consumer good—the private automobile—this development intensified and hastened the growth of the US economy for half a century. Finally today, as a result of competition from abroad, the dependence of the economy of North America on the automobile industry has been a primary cause of the recession of the last 15 years. It was the "commodification" of the automobile, the conversion of the US public away from a reliance on public transportation to a "need" for private automobiles which, since the Second World War, has had a greater impact on our daily lives than that of any other technological development. The car is the quintessential totem of American (and one supposes of Australian) culture. Moreover this conversion from public transit was based on the selling of a "preference" for private transportation which encapsulates our resistance to *collective* answers to social problems, an ideological blindness to certain kinds of solutions directly



**Mad Max:** An intensified moment of destruction we've all been waiting for.



attributable to and orchestrated by corporate interests.<sup>8</sup>

Our relationship to our cars is at the core of the "Mad Max" movies, for what is more important in the first two films than keeping the cars running? And what is more important or pleasurable to the spectator than watching those cars be destroyed? Behind the appeal of violence is a secret fascination with representations of the destruction of that which best sums up our "life style" for the rest of the world. For viewers in the developed countries, these films speak to the underlying recognition of the contradiction between a society of abundance in which so much is wasted and squandered, and the daily experience for many of increasing immiseration. The spectator's anger and resentment is here *displaced*, from an identification of the systemic causes of inequality and exploitation, and from a recognition that alienation and suffering are the result of corporate decisions based on profit calculations, to the objects which incarnate that wasteful life style.<sup>9</sup>

This redirection of the spectator's rage, away from the people who profit from this "preference" for private cars, to the machines which have been used to exploit and enslave us, is made explicit in *Terminator* where the machines have become the enemies of humanity, bent on eradicating the human species from the planet. If the *raison d'être* of the "Mad Max" films might be said to be the cars, or their destruction, here it is the figure of the "Terminator" itself which is the film's centre, where the objectified physique of the body-builder Arnold Schwarzenegger (*Pumping Iron*) itself becomes a gleaming machine which is gradually disassembled and reduced to a metal skeleton before it is finally destroyed.<sup>10</sup> His weak acting and his notorious woodenness here become assets insofar as they work to suggest a machine trying to pass as human. (Best summed up in the scene where his computer-brain searches for and then finds the appropriate reply to the landlord of the sleazy hotel where he is hiding, "Fuck you, asshole.")

**FROM** the explanation of representations of violence as a way of managing resentment and anger which might otherwise threaten the status quo, I will now argue that these films also raise questions about violence and the state. For the post-holocaust setting gives us a world without a state, and thus without the dilemma posed by state violence

More . . .

outside the boundaries of the law, as epitomized in the justification presented by some of the witnesses during the Iran/Contra hearings. This extra-legal violence stems not from a psychological "need" for violence, but from the structural contradiction between the capitalist state's "need" to protect free enterprise (at home or abroad), and its ostensible commitment to democracy. On another level, the frustration of the partisans of free enterprise when confronted with legislative attempts to protect consumers—prior to Reagan's election, of course—is figured in film in the frustrations of the policeman trying to preserve a society in which criminals have too many rights (Clint Eastwood in the "Dirty Harry" movies). Returning, then, to *Road Warrior*, it is a classic Western in which "real" values only emerge when the veneer of society and its rules falls away. But like Shane and similar Western heroes, Max disappears at the end; society must try to maintain itself without recourse to violence.<sup>11</sup> In this vein, *Terminator* offers two visions of violence beyond the law which are then sanctioned by the principle of self-defence: in the future setting, where the state has collapsed, through the depiction of armed resistance to the machines; and in the present setting, when the police are unable to protect Sarah, through the celebration of individual courage and force akin to the visions of Clint Eastwood or Oliver North. *Beyond Thunderdome* also demonstrates attitudes toward the state and violence, for with Bartertown it tries to imagine the reemergence of the state in

social-Darwinist terms, one based not on any innate or learned system of morals or laws, but functioning solely on economic conventions. The economic system of Bartertown, however, as I have already tried to show, is itself riven by the contradiction between an emergent state apparatus and the actual "producers" of power—many of whom, by the way, are indentured slaves and/or prisoners, a rather brutal description of what a free-enterprise society might look like without even the veneer of bourgeois legal rights and freedoms.

## II. After World War III

The fall of outdated social systems, and of great empires based on them, makes some people imagine that the world is coming to a catastrophic end, and their terrified visions often take the form of art.

BRUCE FRANKLIN,  
"CHIC BLEAK IN FANTASY FICTION,"  
SATURDAY REVIEW, July 15, 1972, p. 42

**SINCE** at least the second world war, there has been a decline in positive, utopian visions of the future and an increase—particularly in science fiction—of visions of imminent decline and disaster. Fictional and filmic images of mass destruction have been a staple of the popular imagination, and critical strategies for "reading" such visions have often lain with demonstrating and understanding their relationship to the historical moment which produced them. In dealing with works which take





the bomb and/or its aftermath as a theme, there are certain conventions which determine the critics' reactions to them. Visions of a post-holocaust landscape are deemed "acceptable" insofar as they are used as warnings about the dangers of nuclear war, for instance, while works which simply use such settings as a pretext for something else are not.

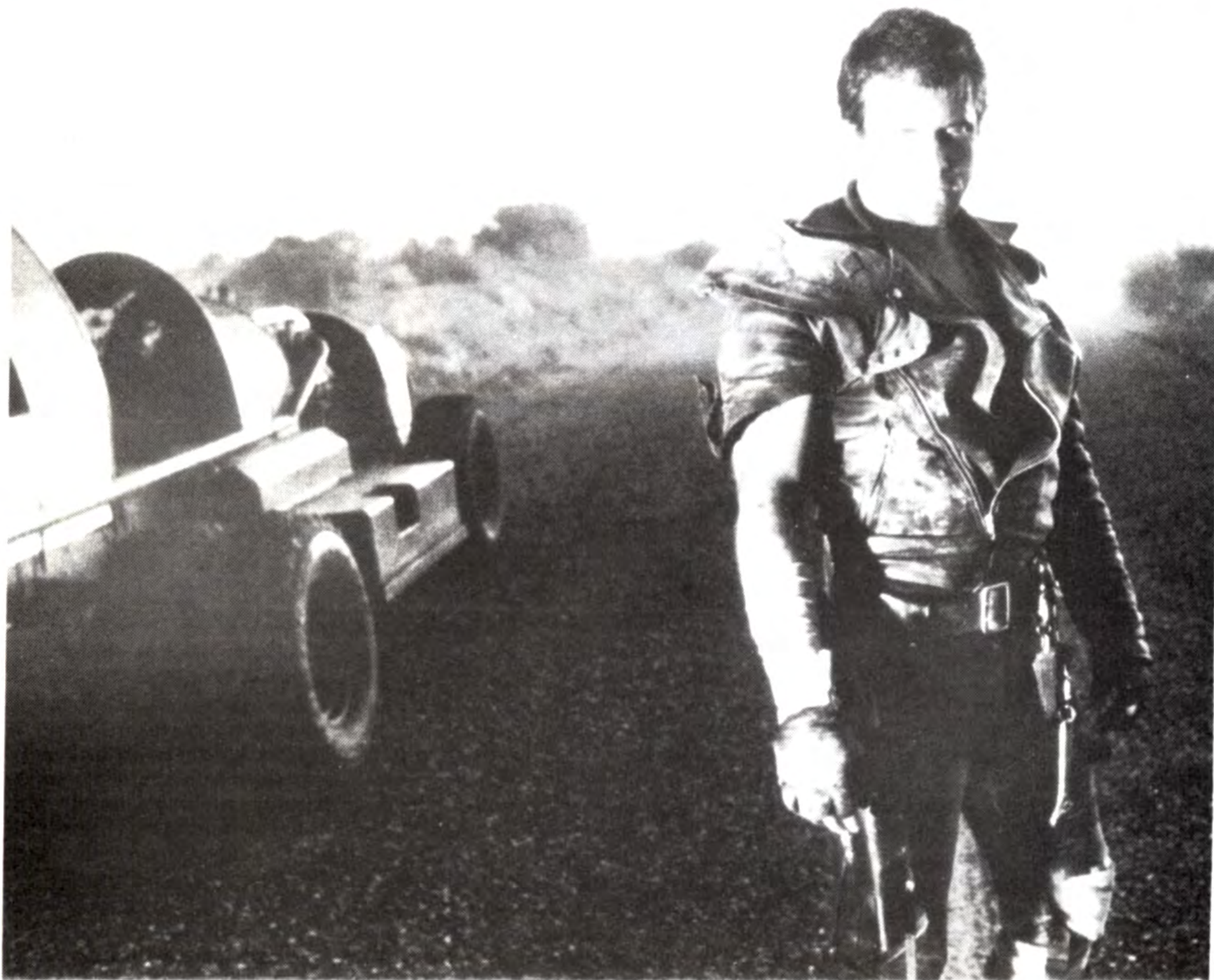
Indeed, one of the principal objections made against "trash"—whether in the name of high art or in terms of the "politically correct"—follows from the absence of an implicit moral standard which, in the case of the thematics of nuclear disaster, either depends on a work's mobilizing force as a warning or, by extension, on the realism of the portrayal of the disaster ("this is how it could happen," as in Peter Watkin's *The War Game*); or even at a further remove, by the use of this theme as a contextualization for other legitimate themes and stories which illustrate the

eternal qualities of the human condition. What critics criticize in such films as *Terminator* or *Road Warrior* lies in their trivialization of this magisterial theme—their all too obvious utilization of this setting as a pretext for the scenes of excessive and stereotyped violence at their core. Although *Road Warrior* and *Terminator* do attempt to explain how this predicament came about, and do portray a stereotyped struggle between good and evil, they are not perceived as really dealing with such moral issues, and certainly not as serious statements about the near future.<sup>12</sup>

An illustrative example of this critical expectation about the correct treatment of apocalyptic themes can be seen in the reversal of the conventional treatment of a closely related theme in J.G. Ballard's "worlds" novels (*The Drowned World*, 1962, *The Drought* [US: *Burning World*], 1964, *The Crystal World*, 1966). There in each case the familiar scenario of a world-wide disaster is distorted in a

troubling and "unacceptable" fashion. The workings of this theme—a cousin to that of the aftermath of a nuclear war—are familiar to us through many of the SF films of the 1950s, beginning with the awakened monsters in the films of Honda in Japan (*Godzilla*, and in the US, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*), through various US "creature" and invasion films. In most of these films, the world—or some important part of it—is threatened and the film recounts the collective struggle against the marauding invader. Without going into a detailed description of the historical significance of these threats, what interests me here is the almost universal narrative trajectory of these films: threat—struggle—threat defeated. (There are, of course, exceptions which prove the rule: films in which the threat is not defeated, and where this defeat is used to intensify the film's warning quality, as in *Invasion of Body Snatchers*.)

In his novels Ballard portrayed the



**The Road Warrior:** The violent, solitary hero vanishes into the wilderness.





Man/monster/machine in *The Terminator*.

human community in the context of world-wide cataclysms (eg. an increase in temperature, followed by the melting of the polar ice-caps and a subsequent flooding in *Drowned World*) where, in opposition to the official struggle against the disaster, the main character turns against that effort and embraces the destructive force. Although there were attempts to read Ballard's novels in some "positive" way (eg. as elaborate Jungian metaphors of transformation), many of his readers within the science fiction community were extremely hostile to these works, even as they triggered new enthusiasms in other readers (and led in part to the "new wave" in science fiction). Readers were reacting to the inherently "wrong" ethical treatment of the theme, although Ballard continues to go about his heretical re-writing of terminal landscapes in a very different vein than in the films under discussion.<sup>13</sup>

Returning, then, to "Mad Max" and *Terminator*, they share both the post-cataclysmic setting, and an "unacceptable" treatment of this context. Rather than use the disaster as a warning, or even to present it "realistically," these works use this setting as a pretext for the spectacle of violence.

Yet I would like now to reverse my position. For between the ethically acceptable treatment of a future post-holocaust setting, based on a work's attempts to warn us and, on the other hand, the unacceptable trivialization of the theme of the all-too-possible destruction of our world, there is another, third way of reading those terminal landscapes. This reading would situate those blasted, ruined settings not in a possible or probable future—the usual terrain for most discussions of these films—but in the present: as the scandalous images of a disaster which has already happened and in whose ruins we

can already walk, although only if we are prepared to actually visit the collapsing inner cities of the great metropolises of the US (Watts or the South Bronx). Like the light from Shelton's nova, an explosion which happened thousands of years ago and whose light is only reaching us now, these films give us temporally dislocated images of a present of which we are only dimly aware. In both cases there is a crucial misperception, so that we misinterpret temporally what we are seeing: as we gaze at the stars, we think that that faraway explosion has just happened, and as we watch these films, we think that they are referring to a collapse which is yet to come. Yet such positivistic thinking, which limits itself to the evidence of the senses and which resists more complex modes of thought, is a form of willed ignorance, a deliberate flight from the reality of the present, a temporal blindness which can be compared to that of the central figure in Philip K. Dick's novel, *Time Out of Joint* (1959), where, in a neurotic escape from the present, the main character carefully constructs a world from his past, a happier time from which the tensions and disorders of the present are banished. Like the manifest content of our dreams which can only emerge in heavily censored and coded representations, these filmic images of the future are displaced signals from the social unconscious. Distorted so as to be unrecognizable, these indications of major troubles in our present, these signs of its fractures and contradictions work their way to the surface more easily in these less censored popular films, while the catastrophes of which they speak are not to be talked or thought of in polite society—nor in the great art of the canon, I might add, from which the "ideological" and the "political" are banned in the name of an art which stands outside time, and, when it does depict moments of social upset and strife, can only show the "eternal" values of the human race.

### III. Conclusion

**LET** me return now to *Robocop* and to the ways these films image the future. Through its deliberate choice of political satire, *Robocop* places itself outside the "unconscious" framework I have been using. Moreover, this attempt to consciously critique the genre leaves the film without an implicit alternative vision of the future. We are left instead with the image of a decaying inner-city where the only apparent solution is an increased and more heavily armed police force—albeit one which will



apply the law more equitably. The society of *Robocop* is indistinguishable from the present, or from the media portrayal of the inner cities, and depicts a society on the verge of collapse. The actual moment of collapse is, as we have seen, the setting of *Mad Max* and *Terminator*. From this first moment, I will posit an historical narrative which informs these films, one which moves from the moment of collapse to the efforts to set out and rebuild in *Road Warrior*—an effort which is partially realized in the social-Darwinist frontier of Bartertown. Collapse and rebuilding are then followed by a third moment—the radically different future glimpsed at the end of *Beyond Thunderdome*.

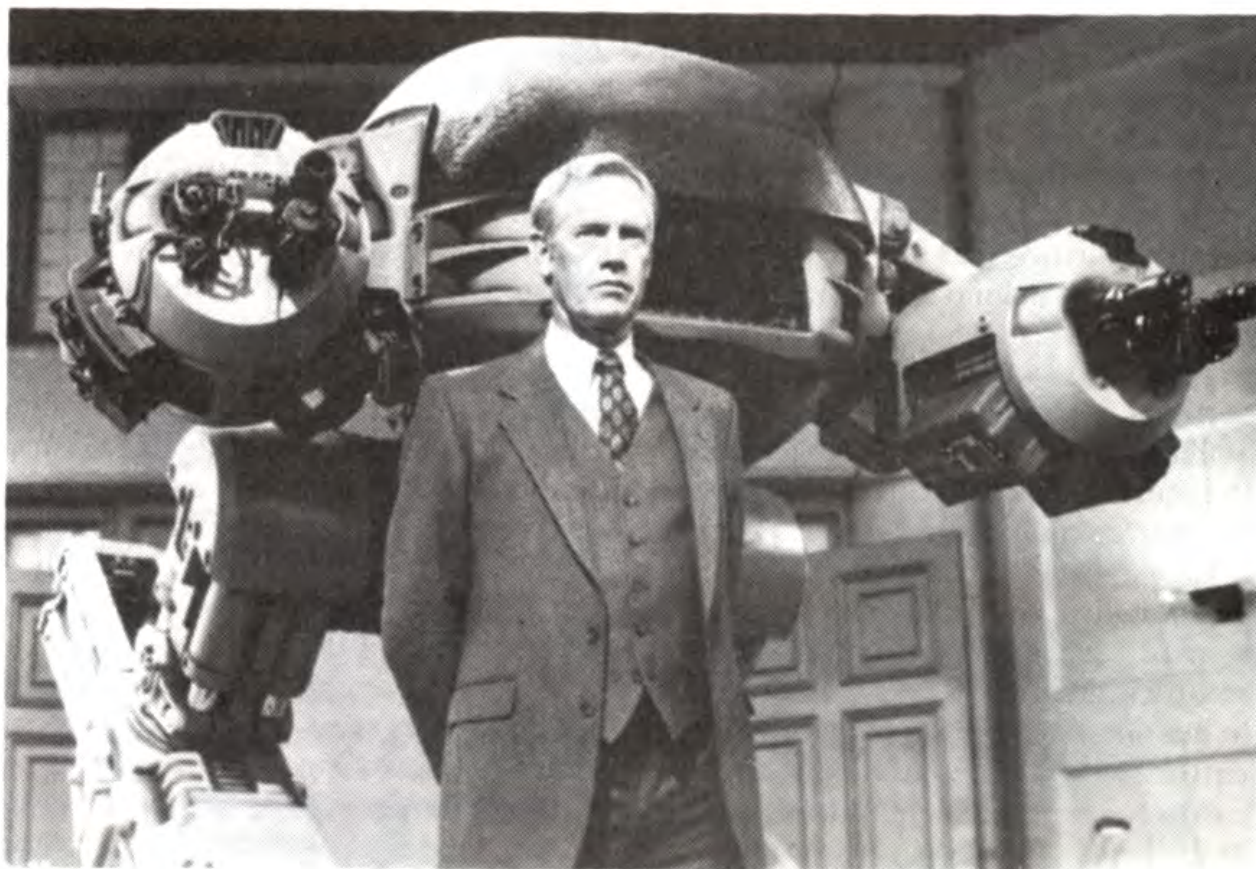
Another version of this “narrative” can be seen by working back through the issues I have dealt with. I began with the violence of these films to argue that we needed to ask what the violence was directed against. I answered that it was the automobile, and in a larger sense the machines of *Terminator*, which had become here the displaced targets for the anger and frustration of the spectator. Rather than take that reading further, however, I turned to the social context of this violence, to discuss them as reflections on the question of violence and the state at a time when the right was increasingly dissatisfied with the “all too liberal” legal rights and restraints of capitalist bourgeois democracy. These concerns find an expression in a narrative which again attempts to “manage” the spectator’s repressed anger by identifying social problems with the myth of an overly lenient justice system and the concomitant feeling that if we could take the law into our own hands, we could somehow deal with those problems (Clint Eastwood in the “Dirty Harry” films, or better, Charles Bronson in *Death Wish*). The violence in the SF movies under discussion was, I argued, a managing of the spectator’s anger, which functioned by turning the viewer’s attention away from the *final* causes of frustration and exploitation and focusing it onto their *instrumental* or material causes.

The world of the children in *Beyond Thunderdome* is, on the other hand, a glimpse of a society beyond the violence and exploitation offered us in the Reaganomics of Bartertown. It is now time to link utopia and violence; to turn my argument around and to say that these films are not so much fantasies in which violence is used as a solution beyond the boundaries of what is sanctioned by the state, but fantasies of the destruction of the state itself—the recognition of the necessity of overthrowing our present

social forms in order to build an egalitarian future. And the final, shocking step in such a reading is to suggest that here the representation of global disaster, in its most terrible, appalling form—nuclear destruction itself—may be seen as figuring our mixed feelings, our real hopes and fears for a radically different future. Let me hasten to add that such a reading is not meant to downplay the real threat of nuclear destruction nor the urgency of combatting exterminism. I am attempting, rather, to articulate the repressed, irrational side of those visions. As these films suggest, a different society will not grow “naturally” out of the present, just as a better public transportation system could not grow out of decisions based on corporate profit. That new future, as glimpsed at the end of *Beyond Thunderdome*, can only follow from the destruction of capitalism; and the narrative which I have outlined, from collapse through rebuilding efforts, to the brief glimpse of a utopian society, make clear how painful that struggle will be, without, moreover, any definite idea of what that other future would be like. As the Beatles put it in their reworked version of “Revolution” (the “White Album”), “When you talk about destruction, you know you can count me out/in.” There is a fundamental ambivalence toward violence in these films which I share. In a happier society of the future (*Beyond Thunderdome?*), I would hope that violence will have disappeared. But for the present violence seems, in some situations, unavoidable, if only in the face of the brutal suppression of peaceful strategies

for social change: from within (in South Africa) or from without (in Nicaragua).

**AT** the same time, my analysis cannot stop here. The destruction of this society guarantees nothing. My point is not to argue that these films are somehow “progressive,” that seeing them will shake capitalism to its roots. To the contrary, I have tried to show that, even as—in a vision somewhere between dream and nightmare—these popular works nourish utopian hopes for an end to “our world as we know it,” even as they raise the possibility of a qualitatively different future, they also disarm and contradict such hopes by draining off the spectator’s anxieties and energy into imaginary solutions and violent satisfactions. In describing these works I have tried to bring out their contradictory functioning as both ideology and utopia. I would like to be able to conclude by referring again to the utopian moments in these works, by pointing to their endings as the signs of a better society which will rise from the rubble. But they stop on the threshold, as it were, with the destruction of this world. This is so even in *Beyond Thunderdome*, where, in the final scene, we see the children who went to live in the city, years later, huddled in a cavernous building lit only by candles, as Savannah repeats the now ritual “tell” of “history back” and how they came to be there. But the film’s final shot is that of Max—like Toshiro Mifune at the end of so many samurai movies—standing alone, his back to us, with a sword over his shoulder.



**Robocop:** corporate engineers of repression.





Tina Turner ruling Bartertown.

Moreover, Savannah's importance at the end serves to remind us that until *Beyond Thunderdome*, the "Mad Max" films reflected an older cinema where women were relegated to fairly minor and stereotyped roles; and certainly, Tina Turner's character (like that of Grace Jones in the second Conan film), can hardly be seen as a breakthrough. It is with *The Terminator* that we can see the "new" woman of the '80s (although not perhaps as "new" and tough as Ripley, the Sigourney Weaver character in the two "Alien" films). For, after a fairly conventional beginning in which Sarah is portrayed as fearful and indecisive (huddled behind a desk in the police station, for instance), her character is transformed when, at the end, she becomes an independent, self-sufficient woman who heads south into the desert to hone her survival skills in preparation for the "coming storm."

Like *Beyond Thunderdome*, *The Terminator* also ends with the voice of a woman, as Sarah speaks into a tape recorder, giving advice and information to her not-yet-born son (who as you will remember will grow up to lead the resistance against the machines). This moment of transition, this vision of a present pregnant with the future is a potentially powerful image of a new beginning whose full implications are

avoided in these films. As my conclusion, then, I would have liked to have been able to compare Sarah with those women who are prepared to fight for an alternative future, as in Lizzie Borden's feminist utopian film, *Born in Flames*; or to the warrior women of recent feminist utopian novels, (like Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* or Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*), works which not only spoke of the need to overthrow this society, but went on to imagine an egalitarian future beyond the distortions and exploitation of capitalist patriarchy.<sup>14</sup> However I cannot offer such a conclusion. Sarah's role is only an instrumental one, and a modest one at that since she will not so much give birth to the future as to the preservation of the past: for she serves as an intermediary between two men, the father and the son, both of whom, in a paradoxical rejection of the utopian politics of feminism, leave her to the present, while they are, if only in the regressive terms of this film, the men of the future.

It is this temporal paradox which perhaps best sums up the ideological limits of these films, for, in attempting to imagine the future they must keep returning to the past. Sarah's son will be born, fight and die, and then on the verge of military defeat, the machines will send the terminator into the past to

kill her. But she will be saved by a man from the future who will also father that son who will lead the resistance against the machines and then die again. Unlike this despairing, cyclical narrative of a perpetual return to barbarism, I have tried to sketch another narrative, that of the unfolding of a different future, one which will not happen automatically, but which must be fought for and won. These films will certainly not change the outcome of that struggle, but a critical attention to the repressed hopes for an escape from that temporal loop, with its social-Darwinist explanations of the immutability of human nature or the limits of our human future, may serve as the first step in the call for an art which, like the feminist utopias to which I just referred, speaks more explicitly of the contradictions of the present and of the possibility of a future of our own choosing. □

## FOOTNOTES

1. I would like to thank David Galbraith for his many comments and suggestions. Of course the director of the Mad Max films—Miller—is an Australian, but while Verhoeven's status as an "outsider" is apparent, I think, in the peculiar mix of violence and political satire, there is no such perception of an outsider's hand at work in the North American reception of the "Mad Max" films (although the first of the ser-



ies could perhaps be called an Australian film.)

2. Among the many books on SF and film, the most recent is Vivian Sobchack's *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (NYC: Ungar, 1987). For more encyclopedic reference works, see Phil Hardy, ed., *Science Fiction* (NYCL: Morrow, 1986) and David Wingrove, *Science Fiction Film Source Book* (London: Longman, 1985). For a brief history, see also my "The Other Alien," *Science Fiction Studies* VII, 22 (1980), 285-293; 302-303. For an attempt to situate the films of the 1950s in their social context, see Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties*, New York: Pantheon, 1983.
3. For the question of Special Effects, see Michael Stern, "Making Culture into Nature; or, Who Put the 'Special' into 'Special Effects'?" *Science Fiction Studies* 7 (1980), 263-269; and Manfred Nagl, "The Science Fiction Film in Historical Perspective," *Science Fiction Studies* 11 (1983), 262-277; as well as the final chapter of Sobchack's *Screening Space*.
- The shift to special effects also explains the relative failure of the *Star Trek* films, for the original appeal lay in their situations and ideas. The films work only in reference to the TV series, for what is primarily a public of loyal fans. Although SF films are now acknowledged as money-makers, popular wisdom is that SF will not work on television, a mistaken idea which will only be confirmed by the new TV "Star Trek."
4. Because the first *Mad Max* only addresses the energy crisis without really addressing the issue of nuclear war or a larger conflict, I shall confine my remarks to *Road Warrior* and *Beyond Thunderdome*. *Mad Max* feels like a film which is still finding its way. In looking at these films, I shall also exclude films like *Aliens* (1986) which certainly shares the violence of the others, but which does not share the post-apocalyptic setting.
5. See the special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* edited by Bruce Franklin on "Nuclear War and Science Fiction" (#39, Vol. XIII, July 1986).

For a discussion of many of these themes in written SF, see the Eric Rabkin, Martin Green, & Joseph Olander anthology, *The End of the World* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), particularly Gary Wolfe's "The Remaking of Zero" (1-19), where he proposes a five-stage "narrative formula" in fictional end of the world stories: "1) the experience or discovery of the cataclysm; 2) the journey through the wasteland created by the cataclysm; 3) settlement and establishment of a new community; 4) the re-emergence of the wilderness as antagonist; and 5) a final decisive battle or struggle to determine which values shall prevail in the new world." (8) Particular stories may pass through all of these phases or be limited to one or more moments. I cannot deal here with the differences between his model and my own, particularly since I am dealing with only a few films while he is attempting to generalize about a large body of works.

6. For a critique of this research see Thelma McCormack's "Making Sense of the Research on Pomography," in Varda Burstyn, ed., *Women Against Censorship* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1985), 181-205.
7. My approach is based on the work of Frederic Jameson, most specifically on his "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* (1 1979), and on the discussion of '50s SF/monster movies at the end of his *Marxism and Form* (1971), 404-406. There—in a gloss on Susan Sontag's "Imagination of Disaster"—he argues that the viewer's reaction to these films is caught up in contradictory feelings of anger and anticipation. The anger is directed at the society in which s/he was imprisoned and exploited, an anger which vented itself in the monsters' rampages; while, at the same time, glimpses of a repressed utopian alternative may be seen in the collective struggle against the monsters, and in the figure of the scientist, as an image of an non-alienated kind of work.
8. The classic case of this "impact" is the motorization of public transport in the US, of which the most famous example was General Motors' purchase of various municipal trolley and railway systems—most notoriously in Los Angeles—which were then converted to motor-buses manufactured by GM. For an interesting discussion of the decline in public transportation in the US as the result of a "preference" for the private automobile, see David St. Clair, *The Motorization of American Cities* (New York: Praeger, 1986), particularly his discussion of the "conspiracy theory" of Bradford Snell according to which General Motors "purposefully sought to destroy electric public transportation in the United States by forcing an inferior technology on them—that is, the motor bus." (16)
9. There are numerous instances in art of the celebration of the car, and of its destruction. This has been one of the major preoccupations of video artists like "Ant Farm," as in their "Cadillac Ranch," a film which "documents the creation of the Cadillac Ranch in Amarillo, Texas where ten Cadillacs were buried in a wheat field on Route 66 as a monument to the rise and fall of the Cadillac tail fin." *Art Metropole Videotape Catalogue* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1982, p. 2).
10. There is, of course, a filmic sub-set which combines these themes, namely films about cars coming alive, from Walt Disney's "Herbie" to the more sinister cars of *Killdozer*, Spielberg's *The Duel*, Stephen King's *Christine*, or from Australia, *The Cars That Ate Paris*.
11. These themes are raised in a similar way through the setting of many of the Japanese samurai movies of Kurosawa during the "time of troubles" of a collapsing feudal system. These more problematic moral dilemmas are vastly simplified in Western borrowings from Kurosawa, from the moral simplicity of *Star Wars* (*Hidden Fortress*), to the more cynical and nihilistic rip-offs of *The Seven Samurai*, or in Leone's reworking of *Yojimbo*.
12. There is little sense of how people actually live in the future in the films under discussion. Some more modest post-holocaust movies

have paid more attention to images of how people in the post-holocaust future live, as in *The Ultimate Warrior* (1975) or *Escape from New York* (1981)—both set in NYC—or *A Boy and His Dog*. These three films give us more worked out visions of how people's lives are organized around daily survival, although all of them fall into the "exploitation" category as well.

For a reading of the "Mad Max" films which argues their "serious" nature—in contradistinction to movies like *Damnation Alley*, "where the nuclear aftermath is only a pretext for the adventure . . ." (322)—see Peter C. Hall and Richard D. Erlich, "Beyond Topeka and Thunderdome: Variations on the Comic-Romance Pattern in Recent SF Film," *Science Fiction Studies* 14 (1987), 316-325. By attempting to apply Frye's "mythic patterns," the authors empty these works of their historical specificity while falling into the trap of accepting the categories and values of the established Canon and then trying to show how some films rise above the dross to meet these standards.

13. The work of J.G. Ballard is in the process of being rediscovered, thanks to the success of his recent "mainstream" novel *Empire of the Sun* (1984) and the release of Stephen Spielberg's film version. For an overview of his work close to my own perspective, see the special issue of *Re/Search* on J.G. Ballard (#8/9, 1984).
14. Contemporary utopian fiction represents a range of attitudes toward violence, particularly in the transition to the new society, from the peaceful strategies of Sally Gearhart's *Wanderground* (1978), to attempts to displace inherent violent tendencies through ritualized violence (Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* [1976], to more brutal assessments of the continuing presence of some violence in our lives: Joanna Russ's *Female Man* (1975), or Marge Piercy's *Woman on The Edge of Time* (1976). For a further discussion of these novels, see my "'So We All Become Mothers': New Roles for Men in Recent Utopian Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 12 (1985): 156-183.

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# THE SKULL BENEATH THE SKIN: Some Indiscreet Charms of Narrativity

by Robln Wood

**T**HE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE belongs to one of the most fascinating developments within modern European cinema, a period characterized by narrative experimentation. The impetus came clearly enough from the French New Wave of the early '60s and especially from the work of Godard, which provoked a crisis within the very concept of traditional realist narrative. This produced, at the extreme, the rejection of narrative itself (in the films of Godard's 'Dziga Vertov' period, and in much of the post-'68 theoretical writing in *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Screen*, championing a non-narrative *avant-garde* against the allegedly 'bourgeois' cinema of classical narrative). More interesting (to me at least—I have never been able to accept the notion that telling stories is a prerogative of the bourgeoisie) was the widespread impulse to experiment with narrative in diverse ways and forms, its central characteristics a foregrounding of the act of storytelling, a breaking down of the traditional divisions between 'reality,' 'dream' 'fantasy,' a play with different types or modes of narration within a given film. Prominent and distinguished examples, whose variety suggests the range and richness of this tendency's potential: Fellini's *8½*; Bergman's *Persona*; Pasolini's *Teorema* and *Arabian Nights*; Rivette's *L'Amour Fou* and *Celine and Julie Go Boating*; Bunuel's *Belle de Jour* and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*. In the '80s this impulse appears largely to have expended itself: the most distinguished current work in European cinema can be represented by the films of Tavernier, marking a return to the realist cinema of Renoir and Rossellini (but a return certainly not unmarked by a self-consciousness about narrative modes which Renoir and Rossellini shared: I don't wish to suggest a *simple* opposition). The impulse survives, of course, in the later work of Godard, and spasmodically in the work of that fascinating and underrated figure André Techiné (*Barocco*, *Rendezvous*).

Within Bunuel's late (i.e. post-Mexican) work, a rough distinction can be made (it was suggested by Peter Harcourt in *Six European Directors*, Penguin 1974) between the French films and the Spanish: the latter are more evidently 'serious,' the tone is darker, the artist seems more deeply engaged, and the films belong (with intermittent deviations) to a 'realist' mode, in contrast to the formal playfulness of the former: *Belle de Jour*, *The Milky Way*, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, *The Phantom of Liberté*, versus *Viridiana*, *Tristana*, *That Obscure Object of Desire*. Clearly the opposition is not perfect: given its premises, *The Diary of a Chambermaid* should have been made in Spain; and *Obscure Object*, with its French and Spanish actresses sharing the 'female lead,' in every respect straddles the boundaries. It is, however, serviceable as a starting-point. I have never been very engaged by *The Milky Way* and *The Phantom of Liberté*. Nevertheless, I want in this article to argue for the essential seriousness of *Discreet Charm*—a seriousness concealed, at first viewing, by the film's surface (but important and organic) pleasures, its

teasing of the audience, its apparent *raison d'être* of playing with narrative expectations, its pervasive humour (of a very different order from the black, sardonic irony of *Viridiana*). On a surface level, the film lends itself readily to appropriation by the anti-realists: film as film, art as art, the formal play perceived as an end in itself, its sole purpose the undermining of the realist aesthetic, with no reference outside itself to 'life,' 'reality.' Problematic as those terms may be, I submit that such an approach is mere trivializing nonsense—trivializing art and its function within human communication, trivializing the film that Bunuel actually made.

Much could be made of the paradox that, while the film presents itself, from the sarcasm of its title onwards, as a blistering attack on the bourgeoisie, it was one of the great commercial hits of 'art' cinema—a cinema totally dependent upon the support of bourgeois audiences, who appear to have been delighted by Bunuel's depiction of themselves. On a superficial level, the film's satire, while undeniably scathing, is mitigated by its fantasy and sense of play: it allows itself to be taken as 'fun.' At deeper levels (to which it is the purpose of this article to try to penetrate) the tone is not really satirical at all, but characterized by feelings of tragedy, horror and waste. It is not so easy to gain access to those levels: they reveal themselves only to a psychoanalytical approach. (Whether audiences generally have been affected by the film *unconsciously* is of course impossible to assess, though one can speculate as to its probability.) In addition, it is clear that Bunuel's apparent detestation of the bourgeoisie is everywhere counterpointed (rather than mitigated) by his awareness of his own membership in it: an internationally celebrated veteran filmmaker is not exactly your typical proletarian. One may equally argue that Bunuel's commitment to anarchism and revolution is everywhere counterpointed by a despairing pessimism and fatalism. Another, more specific and limited, commitment partly embodies this: the evident commitment to Fernando Rey (as friend and actor), the characters he plays (invariably upper bourgeois) and the values they live by (strongly traditionalist and reactionary). Consider, in *Viridiana*, the self-evident preference of this iconoclastic atheist for Bach and Handel over "Shake, shimmy-doll, shake," and for the conservative and doomed Don Jaime/Rey over his shallow and opportunistic liberal-progressive nephew. That this identification is everywhere contradicted by an intensive and uncompromising criticism of Rey's characters is a central paradox of this most paradoxical of directors. On the one hand, a commitment to revolution of which we cannot doubt the authenticity; on the other, a sense that the drift of our civilisation is hopeless and irreversible; on the third hand (Surrealism will permit a third), a commitment to the finest of traditional values as embodied in, for example, Bach (*Viridiana*), Brahms (*Land without Bread*), Wagner (*L'Age d'Or*), always accompanied by the clear-sighted acknowledgement (a fourth hand, perhaps) that these are the sublimated products of the civilisation whose repressiveness the films consistently deplore. One way of





The ritual of the apéritif (Fernando Rey, Delphine Seyrig, Bulle Ogier, Paul Frankeur, Jean-Pierre Cassel).

reading the beggars' orgy in *Viridiana* ("the most heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together," as Dr. Johnson said of Donne) is as an attempt to reconcile these conflicting pulls: *this* (the film seems to say) is how Handel's *Messiah* should be used, not listened to in evening clothes and pseudo-reverential solemnity.

**I**T IS ONLY POSSIBLE TO MAKE SENSE OF *Discreet Charm* if one can make sense of its (seemingly inconsequential, digressive, playing-with-narrative) structure. One might start from Bunuel's own description of the film's thematic (in his wonderful autobiography, *My Last Sigh*, page 249):

When I think back today, *The Milky Way*, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, and *The Phantom of Liberty* form a kind of trilogy, or rather a triptych. All three have the same themes, sometimes even the same grammar, and all evoke the search for truth, as well as the necessity of abandoning it as soon as you've found it. All show the implacable nature of social rituals; and all argue for the importance of coincidence, of a personal morality, and of the essential mystery in all things, which must be maintained and respected.

This strikes me as a very curious account of *Discreet Charm*: which characters are we supposed to see as seeking, finding and abandoning "truth"? Just how does the film argue for the importance of a "personal morality"? Certainly the film might be said to describe "the implacable nature of social rituals"—that is some help, but not much: it leaves untouched major aspects of the film. Especially, Bunuel's description, in its surprisingly metaphysical reading, ignores

the film's social implications, both the obvious ones (represented by the satirical surface) and the deeper ones, which are embedded in the film's inescapable allegiance (derived from the Surrealist movement itself) to Freudian psychoanalysis.

Bunuel's reference to "social rituals" *does*, however, draw attention to the film's most obtrusive structuring principle, the 'meal' motif. There are 10 attempted meals in the film; all but the last (to which I shall return) are interrupted. Bunuel uses the meal as the epitome of bourgeois rituals of self-congratulation and self-reassurance: the characters do not eat because they need food or are hungry, nor even, perhaps, because they actually enjoy *good* food, but in order to display their knowledge, etiquette, clothes, their grasp of the shared codes by which their class is (artificially, superficially) self-defined. The fact that none of these rituals can be consummated (the last meal is not a ritual, which is its point) therefore expresses the fragility and precariousness—the illusoriness, in fact—of the bourgeoisie's sense of its own worth, stability, security.

To go further, one must examine the film's narrative structure, built upon the intricate interplay of four types of narrative material: the film's 'reality'; dreams; inserted narratives; the walk along the country road. I shall consider each of these in turn, and try to suggest how they interrelate.

1. **'Reality.'** The opening credit sequence (shot in POV style through the windscreen of a moving car) establishes the film's level of 'reality' ('what is actually happening'). Bunuel then proceeds to strain credulity to the maximum while keeping the action just within the bounds of physical possibility: it is not *impossible* that a fashionable café would run out of





ABOVE — The ambassador of Miranda (Fernando Rey) responds to criticism. BELOW — Pre-dinner interruption (Jean-Pierre Cassel, Stéphane Audran).





coffee, tea and milk, or that a young man would feel compelled to tell the story of his childhood to a group of women he has never set eyes on before. Bunuel's shooting/editing method at no point violates the codes of mainstream classical cinema; one of the functions of this strategy of making 'reality' increasingly fantastic and implausible is to cast doubt on the 'reality' constructed by cinematic 'realism' (the notion that, as the camera records what really happens in front of it, it must be 'true').

**2. Dreams.** Here we encounter an immediate problem: the boundary between reality and dream becomes deliberately blurred. At various points in the film we are led to believe that we are witnessing a 'real' event (no more implausible than those to which the film has now accustomed us) which then turns out to be a character's dream; one dream, from which the dreamer (Jean-Pierre Cassel) appears 'really' to awaken, proves to be contained within the dream of another character. It is not impossible (though not particularly profitable—and surely the most valid reading of a film, provided it is also accurate, is the one that offers the most profit?) to read the whole film as the dream of Fernando Rey, in which case the only thing that 'really' happens is that he wakes up at the end and eats. However, four episodes are clearly marked as dreams (whether or not they are dreams within dreams seems immaterial) by the dreamer's awakening:

- i. Cassel wakes up after the dream that a dinner-party (with *papier-maché* chickens, etc.) is taking place on a stage before an audience and the 'guests' don't know their lines.
- ii. Paul Frankeur wakes up from a dream in which Fernando Rey, repeatedly provoked at a cocktail party, gets out a gun and shoots another guest.
- iii. The Police Commissioner wakes up after dreaming that the ghost of the 'Bloody Sergeant' has released all his prisoners.
- iv. Fernando Rey wakes up after dreaming that he and all his friends have been massacred by a rival gang of drug-dealers during a dinner party.

These four dreams have certain factors in common, most of which distinguish them sharply from the inserted narratives: all the dreamers are characters who are integrated in the main (if meandering) narrative line, and three are *major* characters; all are male (the women don't dream); all are authority-figures (i.e. symbolic 'fathers'); all the dreams are anxiety nightmares about the loss of control, things falling apart, authority undermined, social rituals disrupted. One might add that three of the four dreams centre on meals (or a reception): one could of course construct an alternative chain which would connect the dreamed meals to the meals that take place on the 'reality' level.

**3. Inserted Narratives.** Unlike the dreams, these are very clearly marked off from the main narrative, functioning as interruptions or intrusions. There are three:

- i. A young lieutenant approaches the three women in the café and tells them the story of his childhood: his father was not his real father, but killed the real father—the mother's lover—in a duel.
- ii. An army sergeant, during the sequence where a regiment, on manoeuvres, 'invades' the house during a dinner party, tells the story of a dream he had about encounters in the land of death, first with his best friend, then with a young woman.
- iii. A police constable tells a new recruit the story of 'Bloody Sergeant's Day': at a time when the police were trying to make themselves liked, a certain sergeant was noted for his brutal severity; killed in a riot, he now returns to expiate his sins by freeing prisoners.

Two minor points of symmetry are worth noting here

parenthetically: there is one dream about a narrative (the Police Commissioner's dream, which incorporates the story of the 'Bloody Sergeant'), and one narrative about a dream (the army sergeant's). And one dream and one story never get told: the sergeant is invited to tell his "dream about the train" when the regiment has abruptly to leave; the peasant woman who escorts the gardener-bishop to give absolution to the dying man who turns out to be the murderer of his (the bishop's) parents, offers to tell him the story of why she has always hated Jesus, when she gets back from buying some carrots (we never see her again).

The inserted narratives also have several common features, most of which distinguish them sharply from the dreams: all the narrators are peripheral figures who play no role in the main narrative development; all are male (the women don't tell stories—the only one who offers to never succeeds); all are subordinates (i.e. symbolic 'sons'); the narratives contain no meals. Most important, however, is clearly the fact that all three narratives are Oedipal stories or fantasies, the first two in a literal sense, the third symbolically:

- i. The young lieutenant's story is a typical Freudian 'family romance': the son annihilates his father by imagining that he is not his *real* father. The 'real' father is imagined as the mother's lover, but, psychoanalytically, this 'lover' can only be a fictitious stand-in for the son himself. The 'lover,' accordingly, must be castrated at the father's hands (the gunshot wound) for his transgression.
  - ii. We take it that the young woman in the City of Death is the narrator's dead sweetheart (she appears to be roughly the same age). It is only when she disappears that her true identity is revealed: desolated, he cries after her "Mother! Mother!"
  - iii. We are introduced to the 'Bloody Sergeant' as he tortures a young student (just about the age we can imagine his son). The student is first threatened with (literal) castration, then tied, powerless, to an electrified piano. The sergeant is subsequently killed by students during a protest. The connotations of Oedipal conflict are unmistakable even though the characters involved are not blood relatives.
- Freud saw the Oedipal trajectory (if 'successfully' negotiated) as the process of socialization, of the child's entry into the patriarchal order: the boy must learn (a) to accept (symbolic) castration as a punishment, i.e. to accept his own powerlessness; (b) to relinquish his desire for his mother; and (c) to identify with his father. His reward will be that some day later, when he grows up, he will acquire a woman of his own, taking over the father's role and position in the next generation. The three narrators (lieutenant, army sergeant, police constable) are all *embryonic* authority-figures, already, indeed, possessing limited, provisional authority; the four dreamers are *actual* authority-figures. Freud emphasized the pain and difficulty of the Oedipal process; Bunuel dramatizes it in terms of the horror story. What finally distinguishes the three narratives from the rest of the film is their *tone*, which is thoroughly disruptive: the predominant playfulness and humour (which elsewhere is not incompatible with violence) vanishes, to be replaced by a sense of profound disturbance, dread, anguish; there are no meals in the stories, because the meal has been established as a source of humour, and because the narratives are about what precedes and underlies bourgeois ritual (haunting it as ghosts from the unconscious), not the ritual itself. The Oedipal trajectory, successfully achieved (but is it ever, really?), is the foundation of the patriarchal law within western culture: by 'becoming' the father, the boy learns his inherited patriarchal rights: his right to authority and domination, his right to maintain the



subordination of women. The film's four dreams all express the dread of losing those rights, inherently precarious and by the 1970s threatened on all sides by activist dissident groups; the narratives reveal the source of the anxiety that characterizes the dreams—the cost of domination, in terms of pain, violence, horror and loss.

I have raised (explicitly or implicitly) three questions which I shall try (not in every case successfully) to answer: Why don't the women dream or tell stories? Why is Fernando Rey allowed to eat his meal in peace at the film's conclusion? And what is the meaning of the walk down the country road?

The first question has a simple but not entirely satisfying answer: the dreams are all centred upon anxiety about the loss of power; the women have no real power to lose. Of the three who figure prominently, two are wives and the third an alcoholic daughter; none is a public figure. They have no roles outside their households, no *economic* power, no true autonomy. The answer does not entirely satisfy me because the film could easily have encompassed some recognition of the agonies of the female Oedipal trajectory, and doesn't: one might suggest as its necessary corollary and corrective Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* (I am thinking of Varda Burstyn's 'masterly'—if one may appropriate a sexist term for an anti-sexist context—analysis of the film in *CineAction!* 3/4). But there is also the question of Bunuel himself. Despite *Viridiana* and *The Diary of a Chambermaid*, he was clearly one of the cinema's great male-identified directors (the list would include Hawks, Godard and Scorsese), as against its great woman-identified directors (the list would include Mizoguchi, Ophuls and Bergman; Hitchcock straddles the two categories, which accounts for the fascination and complexity of films like *Vertigo* and *Marnie*). I hope it is understood that I am thinking here solely of male directors, and that I am speaking in psychoanalytical terms, not in terms of some 'pure' or uncompromised feminist position). An aspect of the greatness of the male-identified directors is their insight (whether conscious or intuitive) into the uneasiness and precariousness of the male position; what they can't do (and their work is limited—arguably in the case of Godard crippled—by the inability) is to make the imaginative leap into an identification with the female. (Also relevant here are the limitations of the Surrealist concept of 'liberation,' which I discussed briefly in an article on *L'Atalante* in the last issue).

Why is Rey permitted to eat without interruption at the film's close? Of course, we can't necessarily assert that he *is*: the film ends (almost) when he begins eating. But I think the completion of this (and only this) meal is guaranteed for us by the film's narrative/thematic logic, and it is the one meal in the film which is not *shown* to be interrupted. Rey is allowed—at least provisionally—to eat not only because he is the privileged actor of Bunuel's last period. First, he is alone: he is not participating in a ritual, he is not displaying his breeding, manners, 'taste,' etc., there is no formality. Second, presumably he eats because, waking up from a nightmare, he feels genuinely hungry (there is no room for hunger within the constraints of 'etiquette'). Third, he sends his servant to bed and serves himself: his desire to eat has no connotations of class supremacy. Finally, he has just dreamed the annihilation of his class (or at least the entire circle of friends that represents it in the film). With these conditions met, Bunuel can grant him a provisional exemption from the film's guiding principle.

The country road is another matter: its function in the film seems to be to *defy* logic, and it remains for me unresolvably enigmatic. Its status (unlike that of the other three types of

narrative material) is itself unclear. Is it 'real'? (though contrary to their usual behaviour-patterns it is not impossible that this group of friends should go for a country walk together). Is it another dream? (whose?). Is it purely symbolic? (then what does it symbolize?). Two interpretations (directly contradictory) have recurred over the years in my discussions of the film with students, asserted with roughly equal conviction: (a) The characters are out of doors, in the fresh air, for virtually the only time in the film; more specifically, they are outside the confines of property and possessions, and the confines of their rituals. They are also surrounded by flourishing, fertile fields, beneath a blue sky. Bunuel is generously offering them the possibility of release (the bourgeoisie is not necessarily unredeemable). (b) The characters are lost and going nowhere (the bourgeoisie is a 'lost cause'). I think we don't necessarily have to be deterred by their incompatibility from accepting both of these readings: the ability to hold contradictory impulses in balance is by no means alien to the creator of *Viridiana*. One may also remark that it was one of the founding principles of Surrealism to resist interpretation. Areas of uncertainty, ambiguity, mystery, the refusal to allow audiences the reassurance of feeling that everything can be explained, is crucial to the Surrealist aesthetic.

This does not pretend to be a complete reading of *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*: I have left a number of striking scenes and aspects of the film untouched. What I have attempted is to demonstrate that the film indeed has a structure—is not a mere aesthetic exercise in narrative play and audience-teasing—and that when one grasps that structure the film's essential seriousness is revealed. □

## bunnybaby: the child with magnificent ears

strange new poetry by stuart ross

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by Peter Steven

"Besides being popular there is  
such a thing as becoming popular."  
BRECHT

**S**OME SAY THAT THE DOCUMENTARY is dead—dead tired anyway. Those lacklustre conventions of TV and the NFB may have killed off any real interest among film audiences and discredited representations of reality on screen.

It's true, all those TV documentaries *are* suspect, particularly those using the male Voice of God narration and that seamless editing, all pretending to be objective.

Yet, I'm sure it's too extreme to think that audiences no longer care. For some people at least dissatisfactions with the existing conventions have led in response to a search for more personal, direct, and openly biased documentary forms and an interest in the unconventional.

I would like to focus here on two 1980s documentaries about Nicaragua, *Eye of the Mask* and *Los Hijos de Sandino*—films that break from the conventional and reveal considerable playfulness on the part of their makers. The films should please that audience bored with the documentary status quo, and also that audience hungry for new views on Central America.

The triumph of the 1979 revolution in Nicaragua attracted dozens of film and video makers from North America and elsewhere to document that extraordinary reality of change. Many good films were produced in the conventional style, both as TV journalism and acts of solidarity. Readers of this magazine will probably have seen at least one. But, even with the best of those films (Helena Solberg-Ladd's *From the Ashes*, for example) many viewers will have lost interest in viewing the stale conventions of narration, interview, and direct cinema, and I can't help thinking that the lack of good new material on Central America has contributed to the decline in Central America solidarity work. Passion and urgency still surround Nicaragua and Nicaraguan solidarity work—work that needs encouragement from committed media producers.

So, I write about these films because of their subject matter and also because they show the health within documentary as an art. The health I feel flows

within a stream of innovative documentaries, not cutting-edge avant garde perhaps, but rather those showing a playfulness with the standard well-known conventions. *Los Hijos* pushes things quite far along that road, using slow-motion, rephotography, and an emphasis on the single frame as a basic unit of editing and meaning. *Eye of the Mask* doesn't flaunt its differences, it's quite content to break the rules quietly.

What I'd like to do here is first talk briefly about the current state of documentary, then introduce some ideas about audiences, and finally return to the notion of the innovative documen-

tary and an analysis of *Eye of the Mask* and *Los Hijos de Sandino*.

### A CURRENT DISDAIN FOR DOCUMENTARY

Let me begin with this idea that to many people documentary seems dead. Accompanying this is a fairly widespread critical disdain feeding in from a number of sources. I think I can name five of those sources. 1. A reaction among progressive Canadian artists against the ideological role played by NFB documentaries over the years. 2. A disdain on the part of the Hollywoodan

# Nicaragua and the New Documentary: THE EXTRAORDINARY REALITY





**Children of Sandino**

populists—the 'Hollywood is where it's at, besides everything else is boring' school. 3. A very strong branch of academic theory that in recent years has mounted a critique against realism so sweeping as to discredit almost any documentary activity. 4. The dominant avant-garde, whose practice has been greatly influenced by the anti-realist theory. 5. The Canadian arts councils whose rigid distinctions between experimental and documentary have reinforced a lack of interest in renewing documentary forms.

And this critical disdain is more widespread even than that. But, the more I have read and listened to complaints, the more I have been struck by our lack of consensus over some of the most basic ideas and terminology. I'll try and summarize in a schematic way some of what's bugging people, and here it is important to distinguish between audiences, producers, and theorists. Audience dislikes often run somewhat as follows: experts are talking down to us; political documentaries are too close to propaganda; tricks and manipulation mean that anything can be proved; people need to escape, not be reminded of social problems; documentaries are boring.

Producers' dislikes often go like this:

documentary conventions are too confining; ethical problems with subjects often can't be avoided; personal expression is too difficult; conventions of documentary editing are fundamentally manipulative and dishonest.

Theorists' dislikes sometimes run like this: a lack of research can be covered up whether employing an observational style or an expository style; the empiricist fallacy—that by showing the surface of things one has shown everything there is to know; the illusionist fallacy—that by creating an illusion of reality one has duplicated reality itself; the fake authority of displaced narration and the larger problem of illegitimate authority, particularly evident in ethnographic cinema.

My experience in talking to audiences, theorists and producers alike points strongly to the lack of consensus about what constitutes a conventional documentary and where the problems lie. Consequently, we should be skeptical of sweeping generalizations about the current state of documentary and face the fact that at present documentary theory and criticism rest on very shaky ground.

To be more specific, I would say that most critics cannot answer the question "What do most audiences perceive to be, or experience as, the dominant con-

ventions?" When such a basic question remains poorly conceptualized, that is, if we can't agree on what's conventional, how do we go about breaking the conventions (or playing with, undercutting, or foregrounding the conventions)?

Of course the problem will not be solved by drawing up a list of documentary essences, since many of the features we consider conventions were not always so, *and* because viewers experience boredom over different conventions.

## **AUDIENCES FOR THE NEW DOCUMENTARY**

So, in my view the question of audiences, that is, real flesh-and-blood groups of people, is crucial. In recent years audience studies have begun to mature and some excellent analysis has appeared but it has concentrated almost solely on audiences for mainstream media. Very little thought has been given to audiences for documentaries, and almost nothing has been done in response to oppositional works, like the Central America solidarity media.

One kind of audience study of the mainstream media that has proved fruitful has been the model developed by Stuart Hall. Hall divides people's



readings of mainstream media into three types: a preferred reading, a negotiated reading, and an oppositional reading, where preferred refers to a reading preferred by the dominant ideology. This scheme could usefully be turned on its head and applied to the way people view oppositional media. Naturally the middle category of negotiated or mixed reading is the most interesting and could be considerably sub-divided. For example, viewers often accept some of the specific arguments of a film but reject the conclusion, or viewers from one culture can at times misinterpret aspects of style or gesture from another even though the main argument of the film is understood. One needn't look further than Quebecois films such as *Elvis Gratton* or *Decline of the American Empire* to catch examples of that situation.

But even the work of Hall, which positions viewers by socio-economic, ideological, or cultural group, focuses primarily on the single viewer. This remains inadequate unless we press that question much harder and ask in very specific terms how the audience understood and interacted with the work; what they considered as the conventions, and how opinions are formed both individually and in the group. In considering oppositional work, particularly that which operates in the non-theatrical realm, we also need to ask "Why do groups of people show documentaries?" It's not so much a question of why people buy tickets but rather why do some groups use film and video in the first place. A partial answer would lie in tracing how a particular group sees itself in relation to the dominant culture, and how they are depicted in the mainstream. Documentaries on social and political issues are seen in small group settings for—internal education, initiation of new people, inspiration, specific, practical examples of what it means to be a member of the group. Documentaries are used in public settings for—general public education, attracting new members, giving background about the group and its members, fundraising, and making links between groups.

The main point I wish to make about audiences is that they don't come ready made, certainly for innovative work. I feel strongly that all of us concerned with social issue media need to be engaged in building audiences. Critics and theorists need to provide a frame of reference for approaching and appreciating new documentaries—work that would include but go beyond the close analysis of particular texts. As Bertolt

Brecht says, "besides *being* popular there is such a thing as becoming *popular*."

## THE INNOVATIVE DOCUMENTARY

I'm not comfortable with the idea that our unhappiness with current film modes should always lead to work that questions the distinctions between documentary, fiction, and experimental. Of course I would certainly agree that we need mixed mode work, but let's not abandon documentary as a consequence. Documentary has always contained unconventional works—avant-garde, lyrical, experimental—and there's a whole tradition of iconoclasts such as Vertov, Franju, Chris Marker, Shirley Clarke, Les Blank, Kidlat Tahimik. So what most interests me are those works that stay within the documentary mode but play with the conventions.

Just to be perfectly blunt about this I'll preface my discussion of *Eye of the Mask* and *Los Hijos* with three reasons why documentary as a distinct mode should continue.

1. It's a practice that forces us out into the real world.
2. The pleasures of seeing representations of other people, cultures, and attitudes can be extremely rewarding.
3. Documentary is an artistic practice capable of great subtlety—intellectual, emotional, political—precisely because it has established conventions understood by audiences—a shared communication between artists and audiences. In other words artists are not starting from scratch every time they lift the camera. We can take a cue from the arguments often made for the genres such as the sonnet, Opera, the western, samurai films and most recently women's melodrama; that the history of repetition makes subtle variation possible.

In what follows I will concentrate on those elements that mark *Eye of the Mask* and *Los Hijos de Sandino* as innovative yet within recognized documentary, and I will insist that these works have real value both in their strategies as film and in what they document about Nicaragua.

*Eye of the Mask* and *Los Hijos* have a number of features in common. One surveys contemporary theatre, the other surveys a wide swath of popular culture. Both films are made by North American artists as documents of education and solidarity.<sup>2</sup> Unlike many solidarity films these don't shy away from depicting difficult subject matter and portraying apparent contradictions. Neither film looks down on its audience, making both of them rather difficult for those viewers who may know nothing of Cen-

tral America. Viewers need to know the basic history and politics of the region and possess a minimal degree of openness to Latin American cultural forms. Both films have lovely, innovative soundtracks that in no way simply parrot the images. And finally, because of their slightly unusual styles both films have encountered difficulties with audiences—finding audiences to begin with. This may seem ironic given the dissatisfactions with more conventional fare, but new forms do take time to become accepted.

## EYE OF THE MASK

*Eye of the Mask* centres on the Nicaraguan playwright Alan Bolt and his theatre group, Nixtayolero, as they travel throughout rural Nicaragua performing and teaching popular theatre. Judith Doyle accompanied the group for a number of months, filming rehearsals, workshops, discussions with local people, and performances. In addition since so much of Bolt's work stems from traditional folk and current popular forms, *Eye* also contains many scenes of non-politicized popular culture—from religious processions to Managua nightclub singers.

*Eye of the Mask* weaves an elaborate pattern of shots and shot combinations (syntagms). Some are scenes, defined as a series of shots based on unity of time and place, and often using matched cuts. Some are single shots, either bridging other sequences or carrying a distinct charge of their own, and still others constitute montage sequences. This typifies fairly standard documentary structure.

What is different in *Eye* is the weight granted to a range of different kinds of sequences. For instance, montage and descriptive sequences often carry many of the intellectual and aesthetic points of the film and don't simply provide transition from one scene to the next. I found this structure rather slippery on first viewing, trying to figure out where one sequence ended and another began and which sequences were more important than others. But wherever one draws the boundaries, since the scene/sequence transitions are ambiguous by the conclusion the film has become more than a series of vignettes and the total more than a sum of parts.

For example, within the six sequences that make up the last 20 minutes of *Eye of the Mask* the emotional and thematic high points of the film emerge via different kinds of sequences, and through accumulations of sequence types function like a last act.



IMAGE TRACK	SOUND TRACK
1. funeral of a child (9 shots, unity of place, time slightly condensed)	narration describing Alan Bolt's Lord of Death scene, gives way to the off-screen 'Song of Yolanda'
2. fast pan shot from INT. of a truck, the countryside speeding by. (1 bridging shot)	'Song of Yolanda' continues
3. INT of barracks. Young men singing 'Song of Yolanda' (4 shots, 1 scene)	song continues and ends
4. children's recital. Eulogy on the death of German Pomares (4 shots, unity of place)	sync sound and narration
5. children being taught theatre exercises (7 shots, unity of time and place)	sync
6. Alan Bolt and Nixtayolero performing 'Lord of Death' scene (9 shots, unity of place, some condensation of time)	sync

There is no indication that these events took place in the same locale or in proximate time. They are linked because the filmmakers have edited them this way. They follow an emotional and thematic logic. We see a child's almost pathetic funeral, followed shortly after with two sequences of children reciting verse of the revolutionary past and learning techniques for the new theatre. Thematically these sequences establish a tension between old and new forms of cultural expression. Death is dealt with in a traditional burial and through the "Song of Yolanda," a lament of private grief. In these sequences the old cultural forms, though beautiful in their simplicity, seem barely able to overcome the trauma of death. In contrast, the theatre group's performance of the "Lord of Death" attempts to place death in a larger context—both public and political. Of course, a play no matter what the quality can't completely overcome personal grief, but in Nicaragua's war-time context the need to understand the larger forces of the nation and hemisphere are no mere intellectual exercise.

Throughout *Eye of the Mask*, within each scene and sequence, the sound/image relations vary. These are variations not so much experimental, in a

thorough-going way, as playful. Some montage sequences illustrate the points of the narrator but many others bear no apparent relation to the narration track. A brief historical section uses stills of the Somoza years and the revolution. The narrator says only, "I went to Nicaragua with clear mental pictures formed in advance from wire-service photos." Whether the stills represent the 'already formed images' or something more sophisticated that the narrator has now learned is not made clear. Two relatively tranquil sequences, one of urban streets, another of a farmyard glide over the narration and over a rather ominous electronic hum below. These combinations of sound and image led me to think hard about what appear to be fairly ordinary images. The filmmaker's exact intentions remain ambiguous.

At no time does the narrator define the image track. In fact she hesitates in doing more than identify a scene—she does not describe.

*Los Hijos* strikes out on a different path, using the conventions of home movies and travelogue, and ending up even further removed from conventional documentary. *Los Hijos* is completely non-narrative, opting instead for a structure both poetic and lyric, perhaps best described as a portrait. No concessions have been made to dramatic crisis.

The film is based on two events filmed in July 1980, the first anniversary celebrations of the Sandinista triumph over Somoza and the annual festival of Santo Domingo, Managua's patron saint. The film travels back and forth between these two touchstones with journeys into the everyday life of Nicaragua.

Safford and Taylor thought first of calling their film "tourists of the revolution" and there's something to that due to the loose and apparently random structure. It's certainly refreshing for North American filmmakers to be so candid about their tourist status. Home movie motifs turn up in a number of places. Children, for example, are everywhere, playing and posing for the camera. The emphasis on folk dance and public display are also common traits for a tourist film, as well as the apparently casual framing of many shots (where the subject is partially blocked by other observers). The home movie feel is perhaps most evident in the lack of contact between the filmmakers and their subjects. Everything seems observed spontaneously, without staging, and it would seem without the filmmakers even talking to the people they filmed.

But *Los Hijos* is much more than a travelogue or home movie. The intensity of the camera as eye and the complexity of the soundtrack create something wonderfully different.

*Los Hijos* develops its themes and makes its points by accumulation of detail. What I learned about Managua and Nicaraguan culture comes from being encouraged to look closely at the minutia of daily life. In this film it's the way people carry themselves and gesture with their hands—while dancing or carrying grocery bags or a rifle—that matters. Safford and Taylor want you to see a culture that has richness and depth but a pretty fierce strength as well. The way these Nicaraguans look back at the camera comes only from strength and a defiance that seems to be saying, "Whoever's behind that camera better get it right."

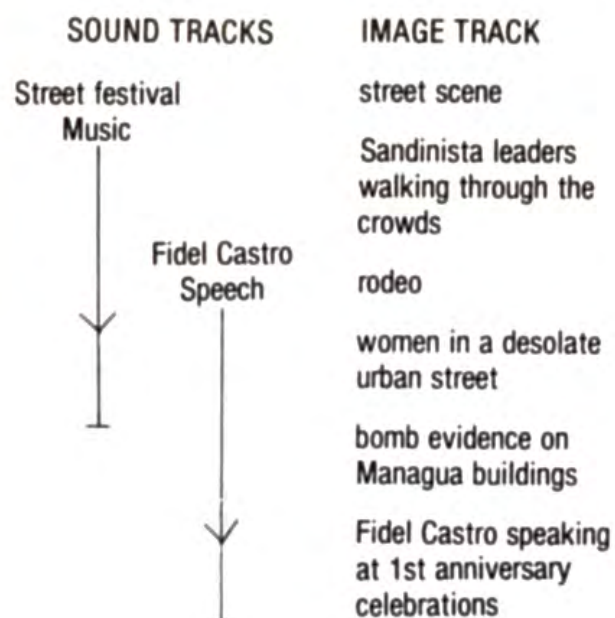
The most striking feature of *Los Hijos*, certainly that which distinguishes it from the mainstream, is that everything is presented in slow motion. Soldiers and militia, boys playing stickball, a rodeo, women in the market: they're all given the same tempo, and consequently made more intense by this treatment. The slow motion underlines a key stylistic strategy of the film—the sense that image and soundtracks work independently. With music and speech at normal tempo and images slowed up this principle can't be missed.

The strength of the music track also emerges because there are virtually no narrative devices organizing the shots. In quite a number of sequences the tempo, key and arrangement of the music strongly suggests how we should read the images. But in addition to no narrative, there's no strong argument within the film either. This is why I used the term poetic—the film provides a series of descriptions which in the end add up to a specific view, but do so in an additive rather than a logical way.

This is not to say that music and image simply float along without any points of contact. In many sequences there is a rough match in tone and content. Some scenes of traditional dancers (in stunning red and white costumes) are matched to a recording of the live music that accompanied them on the street. It almost seems in sync. Later sequences in the film combine popular radio with lively market activity, or slogans from the anniversary celebrations accompany shots of revolutionary posters from walls and billboards.

A couple of shots near the end of the film illustrates the kinds of sound/image associations working through *Los Hijos*.





Fidel's speech makes points of contact with the images in a largely metaphorical manner.

We are the descendents of Indians, of Blacks, of Spaniards, and from these three races we have inherited the best quality—valour. Because people are like volcanos. No one "incites" them. They explode on their own. and Central America, and the Andean Nations, are volcanic.

Other aspects of the film recall a stream of North American experimental work concerned with breaking down as much as possible the established grammar of film editing. This involves a shift of attention from the shot to the individual frames as representing the basic units of editing—the smallest units of meaning. for example the use of short takes and jump cuts give little sense that time has elapsed between cuts as would normally be the case; rather it's more the sense of one composite view built from multiple frames. In another sequence, the sense that shots are built from frames comes from the use of several black frames as punctuation. when inserted into the dance *sequence* they jolt the apparently synced relation of music and images. But the clearest sense of the importance of film frames comes from the slow motion. *Los Hijos* was filmed in Super 8 at 24fps then step printed (on an optical printer so that for every frame of Super 8 original three or more 16mm frames were printed). Here again I think the feeling is not simply of shots slowed down, but a more jerky montage of frames almost blending into a composite. Of course I'm not using jerky in a pejorative sense; it's the peculiar effect that they wanted.<sup>3</sup>

### COMPARISONS: OLD AND NEW: EVERYDAY AND DIDACTIC

The old and the new resounds as a



**Eye of the Mask:** Nixtayolero collective at a state farm. (Photo: Adriana Angel)

theme through most travelogues and many solidarity films as well. It was even parodied in Chris Marker's brilliant *Letter from Siberia*, 1958.

Both these Nicaragua films set up a tension between old and new forms of culture, represented as folk and post-revolutionary, and on the surface the distinction between pre- and post-revolutionary culture seems clear—almost stark. For example, the street activity contrasts with the work of trained professionals.

Yet on another level the films show the mix, and overlap, and contradictions between old and new. In fact in both films these tensions provide the key to our intellectual engagement and our enjoyment.

*Eye of the Mask* depicts both religious parades and the professional work of Alan Bolt as forms of theatre. *Los Hijos*

intercuts between a camera swirling around stickball games and a fixed camera recording the army on parade.

Many of the dances, games and dramatic performances derive from much older folk forms, and are performed in the community not by artists but by ordinary people—amateurs. Of course, the older (folk) culture in these films—the dances, steet games, religious festivals—is not entirely unconscious, especially at this stage in the revolution, and certainly in the acting before the cameras. In fact, the revolution has encouraged a revival of these forms which were in danger of being crowded out by North American culture since 1979.

Since the tensions in *Eye* are primarily intellectual rather than dramatic or emotional some people experience the film as rather flat. One reviewer over-





**Eye of the Mask:** "Lord of Death" performed by Nixtayolero collective near Matiguas, Nicaragua. (Photo: Adriana Angel)

stated the case in calling the film disconnected and confusing (Ingrid Mayrhofer, CAN News, June 1985). Unlike conventional direct address narration, organized around a strong thematic argument, and US style direct cinema, often organized around crisis events, *Eye* relies on very little to pull viewers along. I admire this confidence in the audience.

But the themes of old and new culture do become an organizing principle and give the attentive viewer a means of interpretation. Alan Bolt himself makes explicit these tensions between new revolutionary forms and older folk forms. He asks four questions: 1. Is our theatre really popular? 2. Are we trying to impose ideas on people or are we trying to develop awareness? 3. Are we using real symbols of the popular traditions or are we just fooling ourselves? 4.

Are we using the old methods of education or are we just trying to justify our methods with the problem of today?

By giving a prominent place to these questions Bolt and Doyle encourage us to judge the professional theatre in the light of the folk forms. This creates an intellectual tension in attentive viewers—when we see the street theatre we see it as a source for newer forms, and on the other hand, during the scenes with the professionals we recall Bolt's questions. Consequently, because Bolt understands the mix of folk and revolutionary forms, his theatre shifts the equation somewhat from old vs. new forms to the tension between the everyday and the didactic. And this dynamic pushes the film forward.

In European theatre, even under Naturalism, the gap (distinction) between actors and audience is great. In

the new theatre of Nicaragua the experience of watching a play is a much less formal experience. Colloquial language, gesture, and surroundings prevail.

The actors working with Bolt do not remain amateurs, however. They study technique and theory. They understood different forms of presentation. The less formal theatrical experience now prevalent in Nicaragua should not be confused with an underdeveloped drama in the society. Bolt's theatre recalls the 'learning plays' of Brecht, which were also didactic and everyday simultaneously. It's a theatre that "aims not so much at educating an audience as at educating those participating in the participation itself." This type of education through participation combines everyday culture with a more conscious revolutionary sense of building and learning something new. Nicaragua is a nation of autodidacts. There's a tension and a spark between the everyday and the didactic at work in *Los Hijos* as well. The film operates as a city portrait really; a militant portrait observing, lyrical, musical; defiantly non-narrative but driven forward nonetheless by counterpoint.

The portrait emerges from two currents in Nicaraguan life—popular culture as seen on the streets merging with the new militias and army. These currents, like the folk and revolutionary themes in *Eye* create a spark that prompts questions and pushes the film along. Although there is no narrator posing questions about the points of overlap and/or tensions between popular and revolutionary culture, the editing constantly draws the comparisons. For example, at one point late in the film a series of shots shows people in a crowded Managua street perhaps shopping or returning home from work while simultaneously on the sound track a speech by Maurice Bishop praises this generation of Nicaraguans as the children of Sandino. In another section one sequence of workers in a field is immediately followed by a group of elderly Sandinistas marching by in the anniversary celebrations.

As the film nears completion an accumulation of motifs gradually becomes more complex in their interactions. Throughout *Los Hijos* the currents of popular and revolutionary culture are brought together in the editing, as for instance one shot is quickly followed by another, but in the last sequences of the film we see the two currents brought together through the *mise-en-scène*. As Nicaragua's new national anthem plays on the sound



track and the festivities from the first anniversary and the street festival come to a close a torrential rainstorm brings to a full stop nearly all the activity. The soldiers alone remain. But as the rain continues the soldiers start to dance and jump up and down on the spot waving to the camera and the departing vehicles. A dancing army works as a perfect ending to this incredible film by bringing together in the one image the two currents of life in the new Nicaragua.

Both these films show evidence of artists searching for an appropriate form to communicate their observations and register a certain solidarity. They show strong hesitation over using analytical narration, perhaps due to modesty or lack of knowledge, but primarily I think out of a sense of respect for the attentive potential of their audiences.

I cannot comment on whether the films are entirely successful, since that depends on specific audiences and 'use.' Certainly, the dangers arising from the ambiguity in both films make them less useful in a narrow Solidarity sense. Many critics flinch when the idea of use value approaches art, and they need not be arguing from an art for art's sake aesthetics. They just don't want the films completely flattened into a realm of politics: fair enough. But the political

value of various films needn't remain within narrow and pragmatic bounds. *Eye of the Mask* and *Los Hijos* serve the cause of Central American solidarity by posing some of the more long-range issues. People who want to know more about the Third World in general and the movements of anti-imperialism in particular need to learn that the process of self-education and solidarity are long-term. *Eye* and *Los Hijos* help us for the long run, showing details and contradictions enjoyable in themselves as film and necessary for a full understanding of the extraordinary changes now taking place in Central America. □

## FOOTNOTES

1. Stuart Hall, "Encoding and decoding in the Television discourse," Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham, *Occasional Papers*, No. 7, 1973.
2. There is a fascinating history to films of international solidarity going back to at least the Spanish Civil War. In the past 15 years however, North American and European solidarity films have lacked the desire, by and large, to experiment with documentary conventions.
3. Thanks to Lenny Lipton.

Both *Eye of the Mask* and *Children of Sandino* (*Los Hijos de Sandino*) are available through DEC Films. In the US, *Los Hijos* is available through Third World Newsreel in New York



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Philadelphia police torture MOVE activist in **Black and Blue** (Lamar Williams and Hugh King, 1987).



# Third World Newsreel's 20th Anniversary

**T**hird World Newsreel celebrated its twentieth anniversary recently with a retrospective screening from its two decades of activist film and video production. Third World Newsreel is the oldest active Third World media centre in the United States and, with California Newsreel, one of the surviving chapters of Newsreel. That grouping of activist artists and filmmakers founded one of the most important cultural institutions of the American Left in the '60s and '70s. Arising from struggles against the Vietnam War, student protests, struggles for women's rights and community control, Newsreel films participated in these movements and provided alternatives to the distortions of the mass media. The partisan political documentary is undoubtedly the left's significant cinematic tradition—in the States and internationally—and it remains an important part of any collective struggle. The persistence of Third World Newsreel testifies not only to the dedication and talent of its practitioners but to the remaining vitality in that tradition.

## THIRD WORLD NEWS-REEL FILM/VIDEO INDEX 1986

Listing Over 150 Social Issue Programs

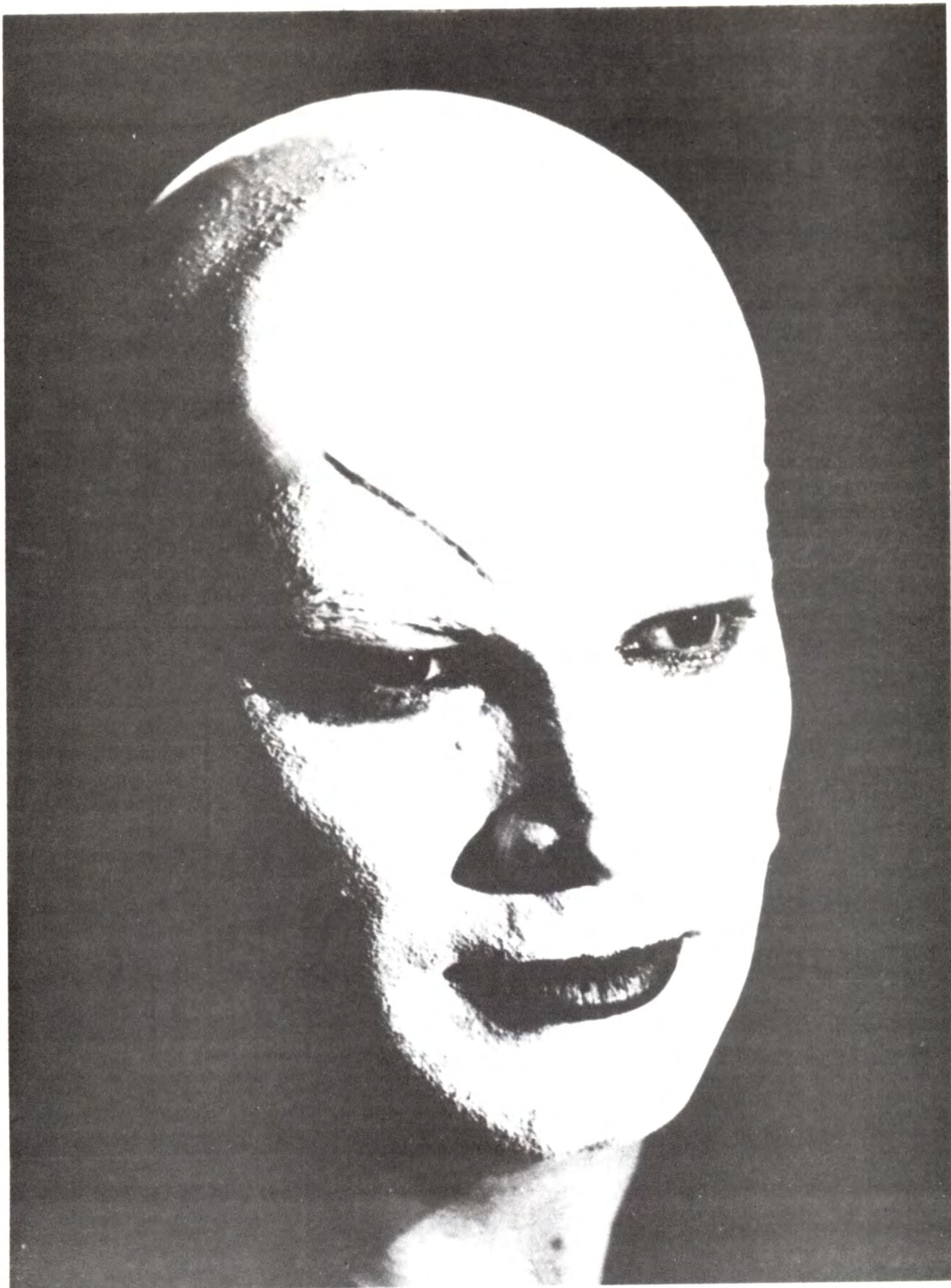


The retrospective took place on December 4-6 and 12-13, 1987 in New York City. The films screened, like *Black Panther*, *Summer 68*, *The Women's Film*, *Teach Our Children*, played a role in immediate social struggles and have had a lasting impact on the form and style of the genre. More recent films included *Namibia: Independence Now*, which shows the day-to-day struggle by SWAPO, and particularly its

women activists, against South African colonialism, and the premiere of *Black and Blue*, which examines 20 years of community response to Philadelphia police brutality. Screenings were presented by noted activists and filmmakers, such as Christine Choy, Emile De Antonio, Pablo

Guzman, and William Kunstler. The strength and commitment illustrated by the films in the retrospective are cause for celebration. They remind us, against media trivialization, of the continuity between the movements of the '60s and the needs and struggles of the '80s.





Klaus Maria Brandauer in **Mephisto** (1981).



Istvan Szabo was interviewed last year in Budapest, by Csaba Osgyani of the Hungarian Radio Corporation using questions fed to him by Ioan Davies. This is probably the first comprehensive interview with Szabo, director of *Colonel Redl*, *Mephisto*, *The Father*, and *Confidence (Truth)*, and indicates both his detached or cautious sense of audience and hence his definition of films that are seen exclusively by intellectuals in the West, but not necessarily only by intellectuals in Central Europe. Szabo's sense of his craft—deriving from a family of doctors—is at once a stab at defining how specific cultures might have universal appeal and also how limited are the powers of intellectuals. The interview is also an indication of the cautious road that directors have to walk when they are moving between imperialistic controls of their idiom and their appropriation of metaphors which might make sense to people on both divides. Because Szabo is not a dissident (whatever that term means) his message—in his films and the interview—comes across all the stronger. In many respects it is a subdued and more positive plea for the integrity of Middle Europe than the pamphleteering (which characterizes the writing of Milan Kundera or Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia, George Konrad or Janos Kenedi in Hungary, or Adam Michnik in Poland). The message, however, is essentially the same.

The transcription is by Ernese Kis and the editing by Ioan Davies.

# An Interview With ISTVAN SZABO

by Ioan Davies

*Your films have been well-received in North America and in the West in general. Why do you think this has been the case?*

It's not easy to decide why, after all, these are stories of Middle-European people, or Middle-East-European people. I cannot do anything else because the films I make come from life experiences, historical experiences, human experiences of the people who talk to me. These stories span 100 years through the stories of grandfathers, great-grandfathers. I don't even experiment with doing anything else because I do not even know how people greet each other in another world, so why the hell would I deal with

those worlds. Rather, I watch other directors' movies, read other authors' scripts, plays, novels, so that I see what they have got to tell me, what is valid for me. Thus I cannot tell exactly what is interesting for people about the films I have made. The people in Germany, Austria, Poland or Italy come from the same Middle-European background, so it is easier to judge what might interest them. They live the same historical experiences, the First World War, fascism, the Second World War, therefore I understand them approximately. But I can't say what people in North America or Japan are interested in. I only am glad about the way they received my films. Perhaps there is some human reality in these films so they are valid in different frameworks. Only this is my explanation and if I am right then I am glad that I, in a few cases, could describe human qualities characteris-



tic to humans in general and not only to Middle-European or East-Middle-European, or Hungarian-East-Middle-European people. This is a great pleasure, only I don't know if I have really succeeded in this.

***It would be interesting to know which generations in the USA and Canada appreciated really these movies. Whether the immigrants, their experiences, the Middle-European traditions had an impact in the reception, meaning that these traditions are still surviving in America, Canada, where different nationalities carry different traditions.***

We should not delude ourselves with false hopes; these so-called successes do not mean that in a small American town people fight for the tickets to Hungarian or American-Hungarian movies. Rather, the people on university campuses, in students' quarters, in the circles of the intelligentsia, people who are interested in Europe, or East-Middle-European, the intelligentsia watch these films in small movie theatres with the capacity of 300-350 people. Only these kinds of people are the ones who write in the papers or talk on the radio about films.

***The audience is not so small, the circulation data shows.***

In the case of the last two films the circulation was high enough. But still the audience was made of thinking people interested in other worlds, and the films were hardly seen by chance movie-goers or by teenagers, who go to the movies by habit. I try to avoid thinking in delusions.

***In many countries television broadcast companies carried these movies as well which implies again a significant audience.***

Yes, but I know that they show these films late at night. So they are meant for people who don't fall into bed at 8 o'clock in the evening because they have to get up early next morning. So they are meant for intellectuals. For example, I know that broadcast companies who bought these films put them into the programs for specific audiences; for example, *Confidence*, which was played in the USA, was bought in England by Channel 4 and not the BBC. Channel 4's audience is the intelligentsia.

***What do you think about the American reception of your movies? What would you say about the sensitivity of the West toward them and if they have offered any explanation about their being sensitive to them; how would you evaluate their analyses?***

I can only begin with what I read in the reviews. My first film being successful in the USA and Canada was *The Father*. It has now been 20 years. The *Fireman Street* reached only a pretty narrow audience in the USA and then *Confidence* has achieved an unexpected success and was nominated for the Oscar, which meant that it made it into the first five films, and this was a great thing. I read what they wrote about it and they analyzed it quite well. They emphasized the human relations, that it is a "simple human story," indeed, a very simple one about emotions, human relations, which can occur everywhere, not only in Budapest during its siege in the Second World War. It can occur in the case of a factory director who is audited and gets involved with his secretary; thus the film is about a crisis of trust, about two people working hard for a couple of weeks and who develop love out of this belonging together, and then they may separate because one has a wife and the other

has a husband. So it is clear from the reviews for me, that the critics understand the story.

The next film, *Mephisto*, has been the most successful of my works so far. The reviews analyzed this film, as in the case of *Confidence*, correctly, recognizing the intellectual man's relationship to historical circumstances; thus the films talked about the responsibility which has to be faced by the intellectual in a difficult situation when the political power tries to use him in an incorrect way, whether or not a man accepts the game. Of course, the reception of *Mephisto* was influenced by the crisis of the post-Kennedy world North American and West European intellectuals are living in. They supposed for a while that they could have a say in politics; these people were the so-called egg-heads; then it turned out that with a single shot the whole matter could be settled. I'm thinking not only of the assassination in Dallas but that of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy as well; I mean this sense of having a say was fragile and in fact was broken. There is the question, of course, if this sense of voice was a reality at all. *Mephisto* was analyzed by the critics in terms of the ways a man will choose in the interest of his success, and under what circumstances it is necessarily a failure. This is a general human problem everywhere, in every system. In the case of *Redl* (again, I am referring to the reviews), they tried to analyze the crisis of identity and I agree with this. The film is about a man who wants to belong to privileged circles, classes, strata, where one has advantages, and for this reason he betrays, everyday, his world, past, family, stratum, so that his talent (which is there, no question about it, since he is a very talented child and later a very talented army officer) would be realized. He thinks that he can create his security only by becoming what he is not, if he lives a role according to the expectations. The reviews have got it quite right, I was happy about other people seeing in my film what I intended to show, after all.

***Actually the general relations . . .***

No, these are simple human stories; it was seen in *Confidence* that a man and a woman, in a difficult situation somehow get together, full of distrust but at last fall in love, and how difficult it is to establish such a relationship and how easy to break this trust. Similarly, *Mephisto* is about a talented man who, in the interest of his success, makes compromises, and this is a simple human story as well, in the interest of his success, betrays his own past and world, and this is a simple human story as well.

***I suppose that we, in Hungary, recognize not only the simple human stories in the films, but we are more sensitive to the social milieu to which the film refers in particular. Moreover, we have said in connection with the Hungarian films that lately, in the last two decades, the great international successes have been based on their giving a picture of Hungarian reality in a way that it can be generalized to human problems.***

I agree, but we have to know that to the audience, which is not aware of Hungarian reality, these signals, messages, do not mean much, because the background is not known. They would require more explanation, more detailed analysis in order to relate to these things. On the other hand, for the Hungarian audience a more detailed explanation would be boring.

***In your films, man is not only betrayed by himself, but the system he works for. Is this particularly an East European***



**problem or is this general for mankind? Do you think of Ibsen's good man about survival?**

I think that in the last 150 years the Middle-East European history has challenged man by such great movements, changes, that the 3-4 generations who have lived through it have lived in a constant challenge; they have had to prove in the stormy winds of history that they could stay on their feet, they could remain a man, that they could preserve their humanity amongst the great conflicts; and that their decisions would carry them forward and that these decisions remain human decisions. I talk about the situation after 1848, the situation after the Compromise, I talk about the situation before the First World War, about the World War, the end of the World War when we had the civil wars, the collapse of the Monarchy, the following economical crisis which led to fascism, I talk about fascism, about the Second World War, about the era of the cult of personality that is called Stalinism, about 1956. Thus there has been the conflict of a constant, permanent historical change for the man of Middle East Europe without a second of break from generation to generation. The life experiences have been passed down from grandfather to father, from father to child, these conflicts have been prevalent in daily life. I feel that those problems we are able to talk about are the problems and stories of life experiences permanently produced by the movements, challenges of history. Now if one succeeds to find the general in them, then they would refer to other people's faith, since if they refer to another man then they refer to other peoples. But I still think that our job is Hungary, or if you like, with a fashionable expression, Middle East Europe. If we can make these stories interesting for others, we are glad to be able to share our life experiences.

**The chronological arch is interesting in your films. The Father was a search for identity where the young man is searching for himself through looking for his father. The latest film, Colonel Redl, is quite the opposite, the giving up of one's identity.**

I think that all my films are about the same problem: the quest for security. In the *Age of Dreaming* the young heroes are looking for security when they enter society; in *The Father* the small boy invents a father in order to feel secure in his small world; in *Love Film* the heroes look for security in their affair; in the *Tales about Budapest* the people push the streetcar toward the tram depot in order for them to arrive at a secure place; in *Confidence* the couple tries to retreat into a small house from the storms of history but unsuccessfully; in *Mephisto* the hero tries to secure and assert his talent and for this end he makes compromises with the Nazi regime; Colonel Redl assumes a different identity in order to be secure. All these films are the stories of the quest for security. I think that in this world, one of the biggest problems of man is to find security in order to be able to live. Security is a basic necessity of man in this changing world, just as food and water. This everyday struggle for security is what leads some people astray because some make compromises which later bring destruction upon them.

**So this struggle is hopeless?**

No, not at all. I only emphasize that this is a constant struggle. Some of the heroes I have shown in my films had chosen a bad way in their quest: in *Mephisto*, the actor had chosen compromises, Colonel Redl had betrayed himself by choosing a false identity; these are the types of struggles destined to fail.

**In the relation between the system and the person with respect to betrayal there is a significant difference between Mephisto and Colonel Redl. Mephisto enters into alliance with a system which is, in the best case, indifferent to him but repulsive rather; Colonel Redl wants to identify with a system he has fait in, from the first moment . . .**

. . . he is grateful; this is very important.

**. . . to the last one he thinks it the best, until the last moment when he is forced to step out . . .**

I agree.

**Is there any moral significance to the system being differently perceived by different heroes?**

Yes, of course. I think it is decisive that faith without doubt is a harmful human quality. We have to doubt and have to ask questions. If we don't, and if we believe whoever we are grateful toward, then this leads to nothing good.

**To what extent do you consider yourself as Hungarian, Middle European, European, or are you a director with a wider scope? How do you give an account of your country in your films? Why do you live still in Hungary, since many others are quite willing to go elsewhere where the circumstances of work may be better?**

Everything I have said so far evidently shows that I am an East European guy who knows only what people know in East Middle Europe. Or, to be more honest, who would like to know only what is to be known here. I don't even know if I am able to talk about anything else. Of course this is a profession to learn and based on it it is possible to make films somewhere else; one brings the actor into a close-up when he utters the important sentences; if you want two or three persons in the same picture then you have to step back with the camera, and if you want to present the landscape or the society then you employ a long shot, and you arrange these pictures according to your wishes. So this is a profession. Making movies about other worlds should be left to those who know them. Thus if you are not compelled to do something that you don't like, then why . . .

**Does the concept of East Middle Europe refer to a separation from Europe?**

If I want to be honest, yes. I worked in France and I have to say that those people don't have the faintest idea about other peoples and they are preoccupied with themselves and form opinions about things they don't know about with a mindless certainty. Yes, I believe, we know something different; history has taught us, East Europeans. Our human relationships have been changing under the influence of history and this has taught us things different from peoples in other parts of Europe. This doesn't matter, this is what we know and we pass down to other Europeans as experiences.

**How would you describe this East Central European nature, this attitude, these traditions?**

I can only describe these as the world of a man living under the permanent pressure of history. The world of man standing in the stormy winds; some men fall, some can stand on their feet; those who can stand deserve every respect since they can stand in other storms as well.

**Could you tell if you find the East European reaction to your**



***films different (from the West European and American reactions)?***

On the whole, not. The films whose fates are known to me have been received similarly. There is only a very slight difference that depends on the knowledge or information the different audiences in different countries have, and this is natural. But regarding their overall understanding or feelings there is no difference. There might be local misunderstandings; for example, in Austria some people did not like *Colonel Redl*, supposing that it destroys the nostalgic image of the Monarchy, or rather Austria, thus the film is against the interest of Austria. It was beneficial that these people, mainly elder ones, called attention to the film, saying this and many young people went to see it and took its side immediately. But these things did not happen in Germany or in Hungary. Thus I do not see significant differences.

***As far as I know, only the penny press criticized the film in Austria this way.***

Not the penny press, but a gentleman, a certain Mr. Bahler (?) from the television, wrote open letters which some journalists who needed Mr. Bahler's favours echoed.

***Presumably he thought that the film is about the real Colonel Redl.***

If it is so then these gentlemen cannot read because it was stated at the beginning of the film that it had nothing to do with information given in 1913-14 by the Camarilla, the Austrian Ministry of War, about Colonel Redl.

***How are your works connected to the main themes, tendencies of the Hungarian film, literature, art in general? Is there any connection between your intentions and those which can be found in other artistic fields?***

This is difficult to say because I do not analyze my works but rather just do them. On the other hand it is a matter of taste whom one feels to be connected with. I think that my films are connected to those wider tendencies found in the Hungarian art. For example, when I made *The Father* which is about the 1950s there were made other films about the same era. In this sense the film was part of the movement at the time. Also, when I did *Confidence*, there had been some other experiments to present intimate human relationships. This happened after the elaboration of the great historical eras, that many Hungarian directors tried to adapt to the screen psychological stories, stories about human relationships, intimate stories. But still, it would be rather difficult for me to analyze my works from this respect.

***How did you become a film director? I'd be curious about your background, your education, your experiences.***

I was born to a physician's family where the family members have long been physicians; I know that at the end of the 1700s the grandfather of my great-grandfather was a physician. I am the first of the family who got into a field so close to the arts, but I myself wanted to be a physician as well. Only I was accepted to the Art College. In the secondary school I participated in school theatre; then I became interested in theatre, and later, with my friends, we began to make film-stories consisting of photos. I applied to the College and got accepted and this made the decision for me. I can't tell if this decision was a good or a bad one, because the attitude of wanting to survey man's everyday problems or the wish to help is in my bones. I don't know what is

good or bad among men's decisions, after all. There was more drifting than real decision on my part.

***What were you carried by?***

This strange world of theatre, film, which if you had the taste of you liked it; the strange magic of acting; if you find yourself in it you would like to taste it and if you have been in it it is difficult to say a decided no and step out. Probably I became a director the way I directed the *Tannhauser* in the Paris Opera; the seemingly easy possibility attracted me. In order to become a doctor one has to study hard and a lot; this one seemed easier to achieve; since then it turned out not to be more difficult but still difficult enough, too, this profession also demands permanent stress, terrible struggles.

***This is interesting that you say, I suppose with some irony, that you were attracted by the path of least resistance . . .***

This is very true . . .

. . . ***the easier possibility . . .***

Yes, this is man's inherent laziness.

. . . ***At the same time you are one of those Hungarian directors who have worked with the most consistency, with a resistance to the seduction of the easy way, with strong rigour.***

I still work less than any honest, fair family doctor.

***But still you could be less consistent, less rigorous . . . in technicalities . . .***

This is not characteristic of me.

***This is a rigorous way . . .***

I don't know.

***I suppose there could have been easier ways in your career.***

No, no, no. There is a limit one cannot go below. One cannot. One has to be prepared to do his job.

***In your work as a director, what significance did the Art College education have? Was it decisive or your other life experiences had been more important?***

This is hard to tell, but I am sure I am obliged to Félix Máriássy. Not so much the concrete profession, but a kind of principle that we had acquired from him. He was a strange man who was unable to be distasteful. This was natural for him. It would have been a shame not to learn this language of taste. I think that his students may not be perfect in using this language but in any case, refuse distastefulness. Maybe this was the most important thing. The other is that I was the assistant of János Herskó, who had a fantastic interest in psychology and was very ambitious about the actors being realistic and good. He thought that casting was very important, the person of the actor himself. This was the other important thing. The rest comes with practice.

***I think that the new wave of the Hungarian film was born in those days. Was it the Art College influence or other, practical events that gave the impetus to this collective of high artistic level and education?***

My class was an excellent one with Máriássy's taste reigning



over us all. Second, the Hungarian film had a bad period at the time, everyone saw this happening. We got a lot of help. Gyorgy Aczél initiated at the time the Balázs Béla Stúdió; he was Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Culture. He encouraged this generation so that they try to do something with the Hungarian film which was just wallowing in the mud. We felt that we had possibilities to become the "new wind." We got all the possibilities ready. The time we finished the College the Balázs Béla Stúdió was established; we got money and possibilities. We had nothing to worry about but the rigour shaped by Félix Máriássy and adopted as professional principle by each of us. We wanted to carry on this rigour, and ours has been a very stringent company.

*In the profession, who are the ones you feel attraction to and who are those you feel repulsion toward? Who are the directors you like and whom you like less?*

I prefer those directors who take this enormous possibility to communicate to people in a dark movie theatre for one and a half—two hours long—seriously. This means that what they have got to say has been thought over, has been taken seriously, and that they try to make the films in a way which keeps the interest of the audience alive. People should not "work" while sitting in the movie theatre but the stories they watch should be told in a way which fills them with interest and tension, with the happiness of catharsis. Thus I respect those people who are able to elevate this profession onto the level of art with their having a worked-out message



ABOVE — Brandauer in **Colonel Redl** (1985). BELOW — **Mephisto**.





and capacity to tell it in an enjoyable way.

*Would you give examples?*

For example Bergman, Fellini, Kurosawa are such directors, Bunuel was like this.

*Would you give some counter-examples who are nevertheless attractive for today's audiences?*

I don't know what you mean.

*There are some other recognized directors . . .*

Well, there is a crisis of values in the art of film today. The film does not know its own future. People don't know if there are going to be films in the future or if the art of video will take over its role. I think that there is going to be film but the crisis of producers, artists, audiences is there, they don't know what will happen with the films and are scared. This is the panic of the artists and businessmen. This should not be taken seriously. Things will turn out right. The situation is similar to the fright of the copying monks when printing was invented. These waves will pass. I think that the moving picture, and now I talk not only about the film but the moving picture which may be recorded by whatever technical means, is the art of this century and that of the next one, and the most important one. The moving picture has made it possible to present human emotions, thoughts in their movement, change. It has given the possibility to show the birth of a thought, to follow its shaping, also that of emotions; since we see the moving, alive face and not only its fixation into a state which is the case with the fine arts, or read its description which is the job of literature; here we see the character, we witness the birth of the emotion and this touches or horrifies us. This art has got enormous possibilities which are not easy to take seriously because its relation to the market is very easy-going, it is easy to consume, and its relation to the market is over-emphasized. Still, the honest director handles the picture just as a good writer handles words.

*What advice would you give to young people with ambitions toward film directing? This is not a theoretical question, since you are the director of the Film Department of the Art College.*

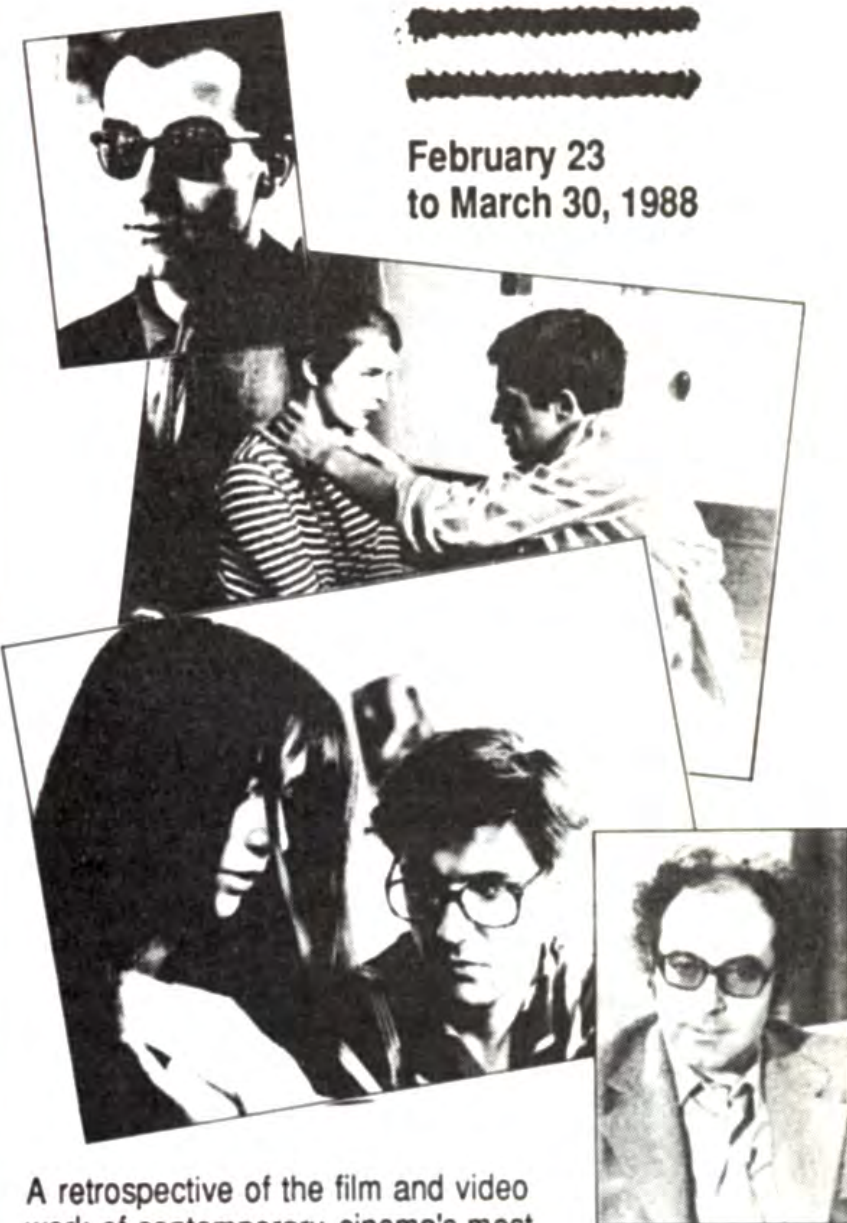
I cannot give general advice . . . Perhaps the most important thing is that before they would begin to work in this field, they should study something else so that they acquire security in life. This is a profession which is not always going well. It happens that someone is considered good in one era and not good in another one, however he has been doing the same things all the time. It happens that one is said to be untalented and suddenly gets recognition because he has been consistent all along; also, it can be that people get tired of him again. This is a strange profession where the expectations of the moment have great impact. In order to achieve security it is necessary to have something to fall back on. One should be a teacher, engineer, physician, shoemaker, carpenter, it's all the same, but one has to have a second profession, and this will help him as a filmmaker as well.

*So one should not think that his umbilical cord is made of celluloid, as István Szótyi said it.*

This is a nice phrase but I don't even know how long we are going to have celluloid. □

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## Contributors

IOAN DAVIES is a free-wheeling intellectual who is lucky to have a job at York University. On the collective of *Borderlines*, he has written in *Canadian Forum* and *Borderlines* on Central Europe and was one of the team for a CBC *Ideas* Program, "The View from Central Europe" (transcript from CBC Enterprises, Montreal).

R. BRUCE ELDER is a Toronto filmmaker. His new film, *Consolations (Love is an Art of Time)*, a 10-hour work in three parts, will be completed in the summer of 1988.

PETER FITTING is an associate professor of French at the University of Toronto with a long-time interest in utopian science-fiction.

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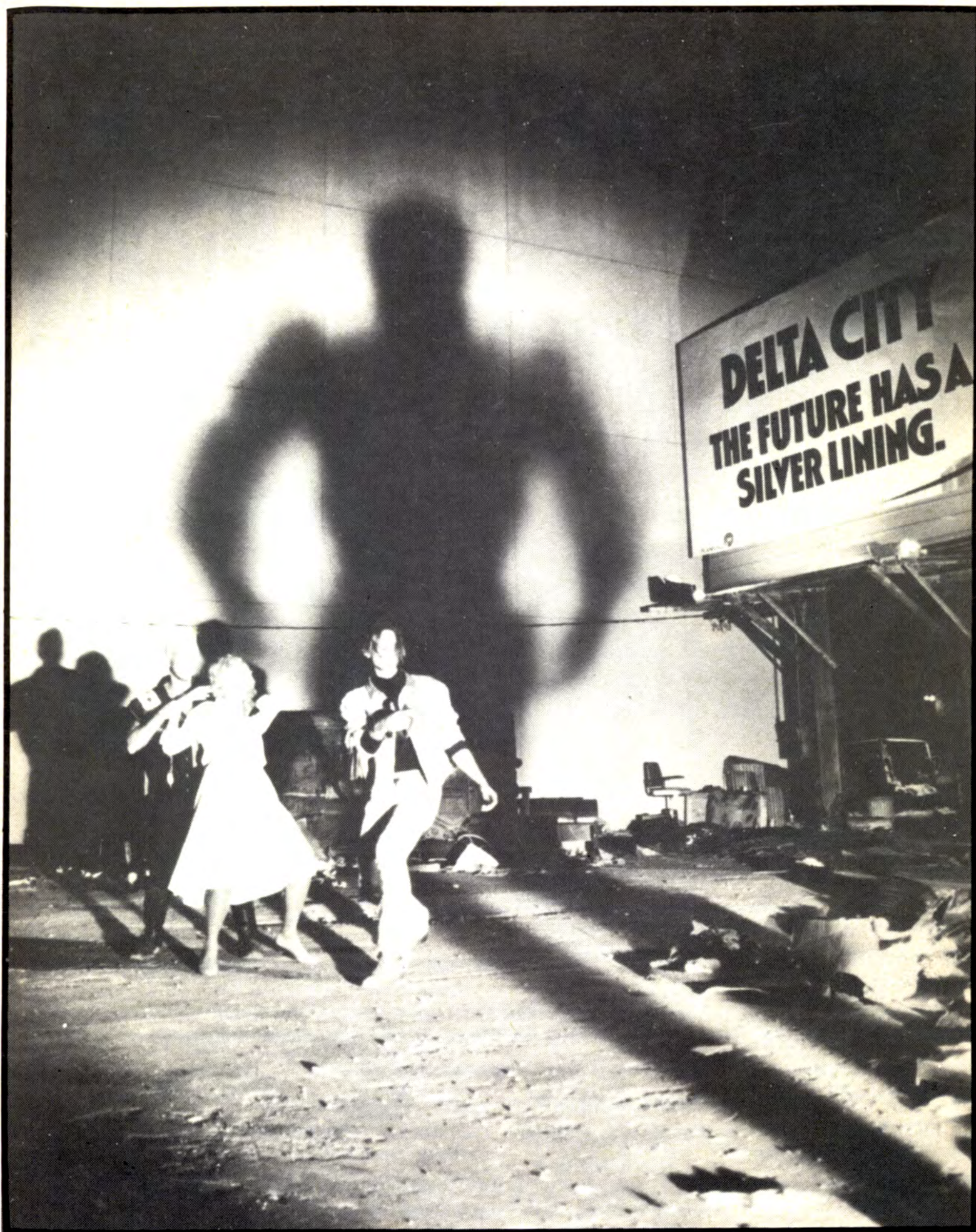
GEOFF PEVERE, a critic and teacher, as well as a programmer with Toronto's Festival of Festivals, is fond of bragging about his new daughter, Emma..

PETER STEVEN works at DEC Films in Toronto. He is the editor of *Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics and Counter-Cinema* (Between the Lines Press) and is currently producing a video on new refugees to Canada.

JULIAN WOLFREYS is from England and is pursuing graduate studies in English and film at Clark University in Massachusetts.

ROBIN WOOD coordinates the film studies programme for Atkinson College, York University and is currently working on *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, to be published by Columbia University Press.





Apocalyptic Science Fiction,  
Canadian Sensibilities,  
plus Bunuel, Szabo, Deren